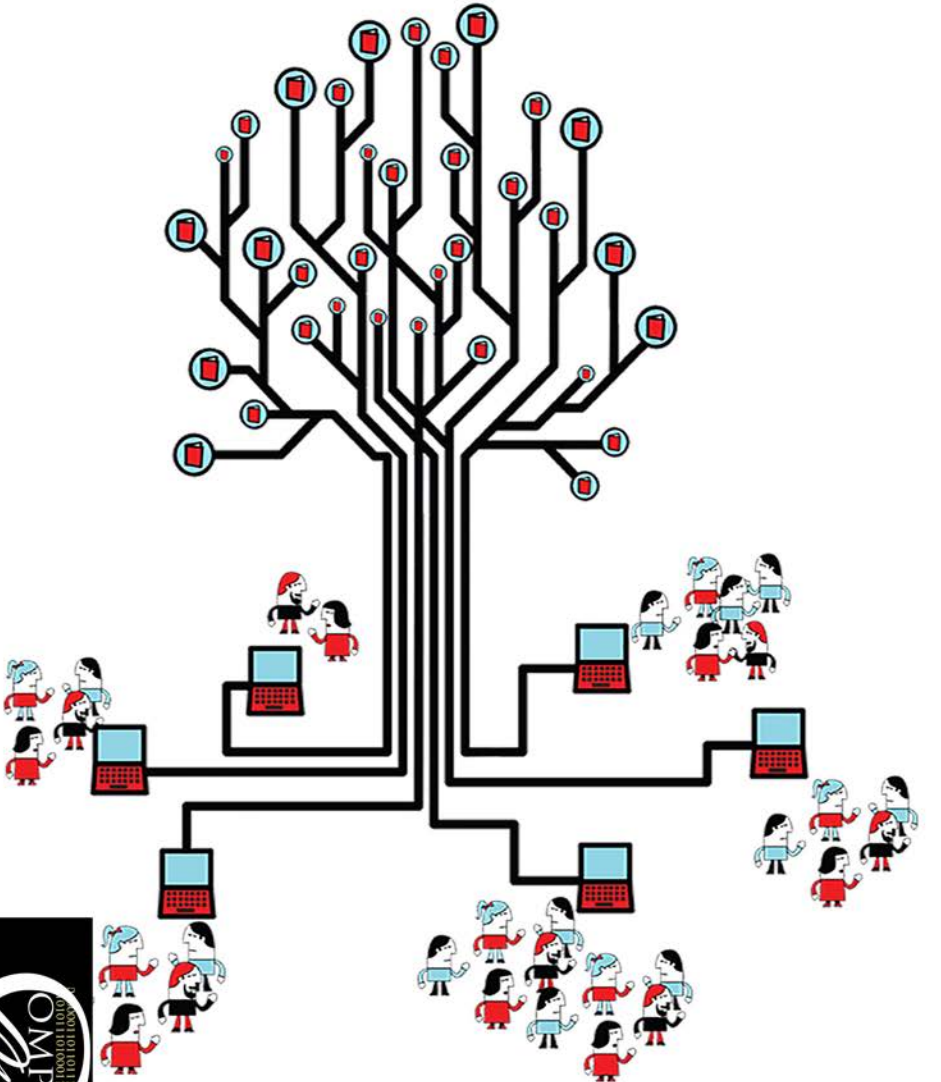
Electronic Literature Communities



Computing Literature

Edited by Scott Rettberg, Patricia Tomaszek, and Sandy Baldwin

ELECTRONIC LITERATURE COMMUNITIES

COMPUTING LITERATURE

A book series by the Center for Literary Computing at West Virginia University, in collaboration with the Laboratoire Paragraphe at the Université Paris VIII-Vincennes Saint-Denis, and in a distribution agreement with the West Virginia University Press.

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ELECTRONIC LITERATURE COMMUNITIES

EDITED BY SCOTT RETTBERG, PATRICIA TOMASZEK, AND SANDY BALDWIN

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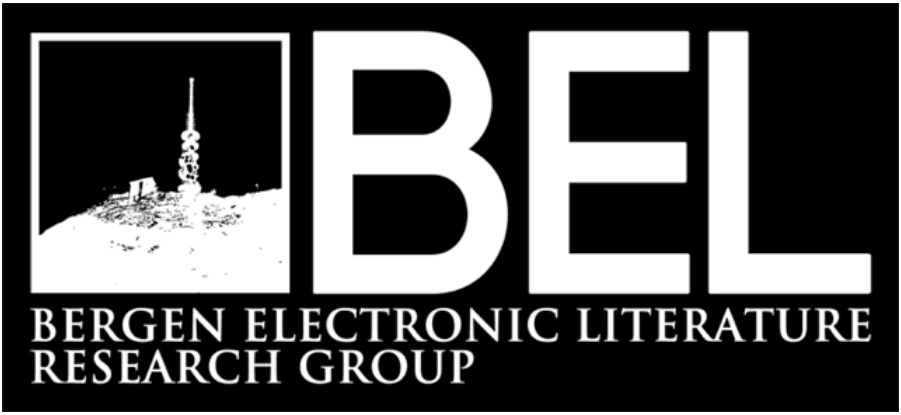

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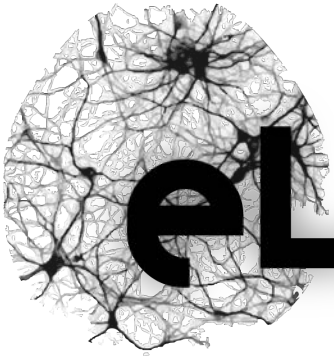

eLMcip

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NETWORKS OF CREATIVITY: ELECTRONIC LITERATURE COMMUNITIES

INTRODUCTION BY SCOTT RETTBERG AND PATRICIA TOMASZEK

At this point there is little doubt that electronic literature exists as a social formation and as an active field of creative practice: during the past two decades, electronic literature has emerged both as a vibrant, international, network-based creative community and as a growing field of research. Multiple international conferences and festivals that present the current state of the art are annually dedicated to electronic literature. An extensive corpus of monographs and journal articles are extending a research discipline while creative works are being published, exhibited, and performed on a nearly continuous basis.

As such, the field presents us with a unique opportunity to consider questions related to community formation and development in creative and critical practices after the digital turn. Certainly, electronic literature's outreach has gone beyond the networked media environment where works are being published in online journals, while also having found exposure in museums, libraries and performance venues such as theatres. It is a field of interest for researchers working in many languages and cultures. A most recent example that testifies to this fact is the striking response to the call for the 2015 Electronic Literature Organization conference that included submissions from over 300 artists and researchers from thirty-nine different countries from all continents. There is no doubt that an international electronic literature community exists and is thriving. In a sense, the mere practice of research and artistic work devoted electronic literature engenders a sense of community. Yet while we have been busy participating in this community, in writing and researching and publishing and performing in its many circus tents, we have rarely paused to consider how the relation between the communities of electronic literature and the creative work they produce are entailed, indeed to consider the relation between creativity and community that is perhaps always an aspect of innovation.

Electronic Literature Communities collects some excellent essays from two special issues of the online journal *Dichtung Digital* (41 and 42)[1] that emerged from the Developing a Network-Based Creative Community: Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice (ELMCIP) joint research project. ELMCIP was a project of the Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) framework program, under the theme of Creativity and Innovation. During a period when the humanities in general, in Europe as in many other parts of the world, have seemed somewhat besieged, convenient targets of austerity measures, HERA has been a particularly important bastion of humanities-centered research, funding ELMCIP among eighteen innovative transnational research projects during the 2010-2013 period.

The ELMCIP project focused on a particular creative community, that of electronic literature practitioners, and asked how creative communities of practitioners took shape within transnational and transcultural contexts, within a globalized and distributed communications environment. In their interdisciplinary nature, creating works that employ diverse media and programming techniques, communities in electronic literature engage in various kinds of collaborative practice. Collaboration in networked computer environments involve working with people with different skills and in collaborative acts with systems. A guiding principle of the researchers working on ELMCIP was to contest the model of creativity specifically tied to the individual: the idea that the solitary artist, producing artifacts that embody creativity, is the isolated producer of creative outcomes. The ELMCIP project rather considered creativity to emerge from the activity of exchange between people and communities. Within this general frame ELMCIP asked "How do creative communities, amateur and professional, form and interact through distributed and media?" and more directly "What are the models for creative communities in the field of electronic literature? What forces, such as diverse linguistic heritages, affect the development of such communities? What general insights do these models facilitate?"

As the first phrase in the title of the project "Developing a Network-Based Creative Community" indicates, the ELMCIP team has not pretended to a completely disinterested standard of objective research. Rather, the team of researchers working at institutions including the University of Bergen (Norway), Blekinge

1 http://www.dichtung-digital.de/en/journal/archiv/.

Institute of Technology (Sweden), the University of Jyvåskylå (Finland), the University of Amsterdam (Netherlands), the University of Ljubljana (Slovenia), University College Falmouth (England), the University of Edinburgh (Scotland), and New Media Scotland, included scholars, writers, editors, artists, and curators who are actively engaged in the production of electronic literature, both as a matter of creative practice and, in a larger sense, as a matter of cultivating fields of creative practice and academic research.

The outcomes of the ELMCIP project are not only studies of electronic literature and the communities from which it emerges but also activities aimed at developing the research and creative communities of electronic literature, particularly within Europe, and at providing a more robust research infrastructure for the field. Thus the ELMCIP project organized a number of seminars and events focused on specific research themes in electronic literature including seminars on: Electronic Literature Communities (Bergen, September 2010), Electronic Literature Publishing (Jyvåskylå, March 2011), Electronic Literature Pedagogy (Karlskrona, June 2011), Electronic Literature and New Media Art (Ljubljana, September 2011), Digital Poetics (Amsterdam, December 2011), and Performing Electronic Literature (Bristol, May 2012). The concluding event of the project was a major conference and electronic literature exhibition, "Remediating the Social" (Edinburgh, November 2012). In addition to academic presentations, electronic literature readings and performances were components of most of the seminars. All told, by the conclusion of the project, more than 200 researchers, creative writers, and artists contributed to the work of ELMCIP project—so even on the rudimentary level of activating a field of collaborative practice, ELMCIP played an important development function. Additional outputs of the project of lasting value include:

1. The University of Bergen-based Electronic Literature Research Group led by Scott Rettberg developed the ELMCIP Electronic Literature Knowledge Base (http://elmcip.net/knowledgebase). The Knowledge Base is an open access online database including records documenting works of electronic literature, critical writing, authors active in the field, publishers, organizations, events, topic-based research collections, and teaching resources germane to the field of electronic literature. Importantly, the Knowledge Base is extensively cross-referenced.

Methodologically, the aim was to provide a platform that allows researchers to identify how all of these artifacts, processes, activities, people and entities are related to each other. Beyond forming a network of relations based on keywords, as for example other databases to, the Knowledge Base was specifically designed to serve as a tool to understand community formation. To date, the Knowledge Base includes more than 10,000 records that provide corpus data for distant reading, network analyses and, as the amount of records increases: a potential source for macroanalytic, big data research on the field.

2. A survey of electronic literature publishing venues in Europe, produced by the University of Jyvåskylå (Raine Kosikmaa, Markku Eskelinen, and Giovanna di Rosario) provides information about many publishers ranging from traditional presses to ad-hoc online journals which have contributed to the publication of electronic literature in Europe over the past several decades.
3. A multilingual anthology of European electronic literature (http://anthology.elmcip.net) produced by the Blekinge Institute of Technology, edited by Maria Engberg, Talan Memmott, and David Prater. Published both online and on USB in 2012, the first anthology specifically devoted to creative works deriving from Europe features eighteen works of electronic literature, videos with scholarly presentations given at the Electronic Literature Pedagogy seminar, as well as accompanying pedagogical materials.
4. A book publication *Remediating the Social* including the exhibition catalog and conference proceedings, edited by Simon Biggs.
5. An ethnographic study including case-studies of three network-mediated creative communities, conducted by Penny Travlou.
6. A final report including reflective essays by project participants about their research theme and seminar results produced during the project, including recommendations for cultural policymakers and other stakeholders in the field. It was edited by Sandy Baldwin and Scott Rettberg and published in 2014 as *Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice* in the Computing Literature series published by the West Virginia University Press.

7. Several special issues of journals focused on specific research themes of the ELMCIP project, including the 2012 issues 41 and 42 of *Dichtung Digital* (edited by Scott Rettberg and Patricia Tomaszek), an issue of the *Performance Research Journal* (edited by Jerome Fletcher and Ric Allsopp) in 2013, and a thematic section of the Slovenian journal *Primerjalna književnost* 36.1 on electronic literature and new media art edited by Janez Strehovec in the same year.
8. Several video documentaries including Richard Ashrowan's *ELMCIP Remediating the Social* and Talan Memmott's feature-length *The Exquisite Corpus: Issues in Electronic Literature*.

The diverse collection of essays you encounter in this volume initially emerged from a seminar on Electronic Literature Communities produced at the University of Bergen in September 2010. Beyond the specific examples presented at that seminar, however at the beginning of 2011, we issued an open call for papers that engaged the broad theme of community-based research in digital artistic practices, with a special focus on electronic literature. This volume presents a number of different types of perspectives on the role and function of community in the practice of contemporary electronic literature, ranging from studies of communities that form around a particular theme, genre or authoring software, to insights into the collaborative dynamics of creating a work with practitioners coming from various disciplines and different nations, to comparisons between emergent and planned, or institutionally-driven communities.

What you will not find here—yet—is a sweeping theoretical analysis or decisive conclusion about the function and formation of community in the production of creativity. There is no unified field theory of creativity to be found here. These case studies, which describe and consider e-lit communities in a number of different ways, rather provide materials for further reflection, research and post-processing. As such, this collection presents a starting point for broader theoretical analyses of creative communities. This book offers histories of creative affiliations in electronic literature, namely what we might describe as snapshots of consensus-based communities in their process of formation. Another requirement in meeting the need to theorize the field is to gather more data about the community in question. For this endeavor, the extensively cross-referenced materials gathered in the ELMCIP Electronic Literature Knowledge Base, by capturing

not only information about artifacts, actors, and events, but also the relations between them, provide not only a pool of data but also an analytic tool for researching the field of electronic literature.

Because the electronic literature community is intrinsically intertwined with the global network, the development of e-lit has been more international in nature than many literary movements that preceded it, yet it is still the case that many communities are emerging from and are responsive national and language-based literary traditions. A number of the essays published in the two special issues of *Dichtung Digital* are not published here, including several that examine specific examples of electronic literature communities within national and language-based contexts. We omit these essays from this collection not because they are of lesser interest in the consideration of electronic literature communities but because we feel that they, along with related essays published in the 2010 and 2012 issues of the *Cybertext Yearbook* and a 2014 issue of *CLCWeb: Contemporary Literature and Culture*, merit a separate future volume focused on a comparative outlook on national and language-group based electronic literature communities. There are a number of important institutions and communities not represented here, such as the UK-based trAce Online Writing Centre, which would be part of a complete treatment of the history of electronic literature communities.

The chapters of this book provide a foundation for considering the narratives and histories of specific institutional and para-institutional communities central to the establishment of the field; for addressing the complex relationships between community, genre, and technology evident for example in communities that developed around the platform of Flash or the genre of Interactive Fiction; and for the consideration of specific projects and architectures of participation that are formulated around network-based collaborative writing practices such as in Netprovs.

This collection provides us with landmarks to find our way through histories that took shape parallely by remembering events, journal launches, mailing lists, formal processes of institutionalization, publications of creative work, and other happenings that served as impetus for the communities to form underneath the umbrella of electronic literature in practice. A broad range of research aims and methodologies are represented within the studies published in this book, ranging from an ethnographic approach (Travlou; Biggs), historical approaches based on interviews and a distant reading of the field (Walker Rettberg), research

based on archival materials, documents and ephemera (Rettberg), conversations from Listservs and community websites (Glazier; Leishman), in addition to more traditional literary methodologies, and anecdotal accounts from individuals who were active participants developing the communities they discuss. Along with individual practice-based approaches to community writing practices (Løvlie), we find analyses of particular communities that formed around platforms, or particular writing practices devoted to authors working within Flash (Leishman), or as part of the Interactive Fiction community (Montfort and Short). A most contemporary outlook on an emergent community of writers forming around a particular writing practice in networked media is Marino and Wittig's contribution devoted to how the collaborative writing genre known as Netprovs emerged. One might contest, as Sandy Baldwin does in *The Internet Unconscious*, whether any of these collaborative practices, temporary affiliations, and institutional infrastructures actually constitute "community" as it has traditionally been understood in the anthropological sense, but they clearly have resulted in new types of creative work, new modes of research, new types of publishing venues, and new hybrid disciplines within the humanities.

In "Electronic Literature Seen from a Distance: The Beginnings of a Field" Jill Walker Rettberg initiates a process of engaging with distant reading techniques—combined with the intimacy of primary source interviews—to begin to develop a better understanding of how the field found its footing. Apart from discussing how publishing practices in the field emerged and what role those played in reaching an audience that may in itself be considered as a community of readers, Walker Rettberg's research establishes that online and offline social networks were important to the development of electronic literature. Walker Rettberg demonstrates that long before Marc Zuckerberg had his first visions of Facebook, online and offline social networks were important to the formation of the field of electronic literature.

Simon Biggs and Penny Travlou's "Distributed Authorship and Creative Communities" describes an ethnographic approach to studying network-based creative communities. Studying the particular example of the UK-based electronic literature and digital arts community Furtherfield, Biggs and Travlou consider an example of how creative communities form and interact within networked media, how electronic literature materializes as a result of those contexts, and consider how innovation emerges from that.

Yra van Dijk's "Amateurs Online: Creativity in a Community" presents us with an intriguing analysis of the Interactive Fiction community from a standpoint of Latourian network analysis. The IF community, which is also analyzed and described in Nick Montfort and Emily Short's subsequent chapter, provides an example of a community that has developed a complete support infrastructure, including for example free and open software, mailing lists, competitions, in order to sustain a digital literary genre. Through her analysis of the practices and discourse of one of the important online discussion groups in the community, *rec.arts.int-fiction*, van Dijk considers evidence of how a network-based "amateur" literary community functions differently from the established organs of print literary culture, and how this model might inform other emerging practices in electronic literature.

In "Communities/Commons: A Snap Line of Digital Practice," Loss Pequeño Glazier describes the beginnings of the community that established that very important festival. Glazier tracks the foundation of the Electronic Poetry Center in 1994, along with the launch of the Poetics List (Charles Bernstein in 1993) and demonstrates the connections between e-Poetry and a longer tradition of experimental poetry. Historical notes from the listserv from that time feed his contribution.

In "Developing an Identity for the Field of Electronic Literature: Reflections on the Electronic Literature Organization Archives" Scott Rettberg, a cofounder of the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) documents the origination in 1999 and evolution of the literary nonprofit organization as a collective identity for an emergent field, basing his reflective consideration of this history on archival materials and ephemera that document the early years of this still-vital organization. Rettberg considers how the role, mission, and activity of the ELO changed equally in response to developments in creative practice and in academe, and how ELO helped to foster an internationalized sense of community that crosses over scholarly and artistic practices.

Given that particular software platforms to some extent constrain and afford digital writing practices, techniques, and styles of works that are produced using them, there is no doubt that technology plays a particularly special role in electronic literature: a text generator written in Python is going to have certain material differences from a multimedia poem produced in Flash. While this fact is in itself interesting, perhaps less-understood is the relationship between cre-

ative practices in particular platforms and the communities that develop around them. Software alone is not exclusively determinative in the formation of digital literary genres: the social apparatus a particular community develops around the use of a particular platform may ultimately be more important than the architecture of the platform itself. In some cases, in fact, the platform itself might be an outcome of community—it can be argued that this is often the case in open source software development. It however remains questionable what remains of a community and its outcomes that is formed around a proprietary software such as the community of authors creating works in Flash, which is less and less in use. Touching on some of these topics, this book includes two essays that consider platform-based creative communities: Nick Montfort and Emily Short's piece on interactive fiction communities, and Donna Leishman's essay on the Flash community.

Andres Sundnes Løvlie's contribution also addresses question of the role of community building within a particular platform while at the same time presenting a particular experimental writing practice he pursued between the Spring of 2009 and the Fall of 2010. Methodologically, Løvlie sought to establish what may be called a planned community of writers through 1) the development of textopia, a platform particularly designed for writing and sharing locative literature, and 2) through public calls and writing competitions based on literary game design to facilitate writing in the system. Løvlie's contribution was part of a project he conducted throughout his PhD and bears insights that critically relate to the platform design of textopia, the writing platform, participation barriers and success, planned community building and insights as to how external motivation (such as prizes) is a factor to participate in a writing community.

Mark C. Marino and Rob Wittig in turn present a writing practice that spreads across networked social media platforms, building creative communities that function more like temporary autonomous zones of creative play than extrinsically motivated endeavors. In their seminal essay on "netprov," a new type of genre and community formation particular to the network context is introduced; one that serves as an example of how the act of writing together can itself be the basis for community. In the fashion of a Twitterlogue Marino and Wittig apply netprov writing practices in their reflection of this genre's origins and potentialities.

Considering all the contributions in the book, what do we learn from how the various communities within the field of e-lit keep emerging? Based on the articles published in the double-issue of *Dichtung Digital*, Walker Rettberg and Tomaszek sought to formalize categories upon which community development emerges within the field of e-lit (Walker Rettberg and Tomaszek 2014). Together, they come up with categories that describe communities that emerge through external stimulation: awards, commissions, and competitions, or communities that emerge within "organic community spaces." A community thus may emerge from the writerly spaces of discussions such as Listservs, blogs, and online journals, while others represent a community of practitioners that foster community as they write together, be it within a particular platform, or genre, or seemingly at random in networked Netprovs evolving within various social media spaces. Other communities however only evolve upon secured funding, or an institutional context (Walker Rettberg and Tomaszek 2014). Many of the communities described in this book are self-organizing species have grown as long their base is intact, while some others fell victim to waning interest, obsolescent technological platforms, or absent funding.

The interconnected communities of electronic literature appear a kind of posthuman hypertext, a network of humans and technology with many pulsing and bifurcating nodes of activity. If it were a building, it would be a postmodern structure with many rooms, many architects, and many builders continuously at work on new additions at the edges of the property. Different human and computer languages could be heard pouring forth from each wing, interpreting, overriding, and interpolating each other, and diverse materials and styles would be represented in the interior decoration and outer shell, but all would have a pathway to a common room at the center. Without adhering to any specific shared agenda, the communities documented here have evolved in conversation with each other. Together, they provide a holistic impression of the field of electronic literature's histories and the process of its continuous reinvention.

ELECTRONIC LITERATURE SEEN FROM A DISTANCE: THE BEGINNINGS OF A FIELD

BY JILL WALKER RETTBERG

This chapter outlines the development of the hypertext fiction community that arose in the United States of America from the late eighties and onwards. This community was separate from the interactive fiction (IF) community (and largely thought of its works as different from "games") and largely revolved around the use of Storyspace, a software tool for creating electronic literature, and later, around Eastgate, a publisher of hypertext fiction and the company that developed Storyspace. While some work was written and published in Hypercard and other systems, the technology of a dominant software authoring tool and of the mechanics of distribution (diskettes sold by mail order) formed the hub of the electronic literature community during this period. There was little or no communication with other communities, such as the IF community or digital art communities. With the advent of the web, new authoring and distribution channels opened up, and this hub gradually lost its dominance. The transition from this relatively centralized and explicit community to the networked communities and scattered individuals of the web is an interesting one to explore. I will base this research on historical websites and articles published at the time, as well as on interviews.

INTRODUCTION

When did electronic literature begin? The answer to this question depends upon what, exactly, this field of practice includes. Does electronic literature begin with Michael Joyce's hypertext fiction, *afternoon, a story*, first presented in 1987 and published in 1990? Does it begin with bp Nichol's poems written in BASIC in 1984? Or with Colossal Cave Adventure, released in 1976? Perhaps it begins with the love letter generator Christopher Strachey wrote for the Manchester Mark I in 1952 (Wardrip-Fruin 2005)? Or as Lori Emerson recently proposed in her blog post (2011), perhaps electronic literature only began when the Electronic Literature Organization was established in 1999, and the term was truly institutionalized?

This chapter starts to map one beginning of what we have later come to call electronic literature. I wanted to write a history of the early days of hypertext fiction in the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s, particularly looking at the ways in which a community formed around these works. I had thought this would be an easy task. The most important works of the time are cited so repeatedly in so many papers in the field that we all know their names. Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story*, Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* and Stuart Moulthop's *Victory Garden* are far more frequently cited than any other works of electronic literature (fig. 2). Yet the more I investigated the period, the more works I discovered that I had not previously heard of. Many works of electronic literature were published prior to *afternoon*, and there were several other publishers in addition to Eastgate, though Eastgate alone has survived in the USA. I will return to some of these later in this chapter.

My first publication on electronic literature was a close reading of *afternoon* (Walker Rettberg 1999). This chapter, in contrast, will not attempt to read or interpret any individual works. Instead I want to try to read them as a field, from a distance. In my research, I have used the ELMCIP Electronic Literature Knowledge Base as a tool for discovering and documenting works, criticism, events and publishers, and also for understanding connections and frequencies. I also use Google's Ngram viewer that allows the visualization of search results across a large number of digitized books. Using databases such as these gives us new opportunities for a kind of "distant reading" of literature, as Franco Moretti advocates in *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (2005, 1). A complete "distant reading" of the field of electronic literature is not possible at the present time. Despite the increase in databases on electronic literature, and the wealth of information already available in them, we are very far from having a complete overview of all electronic literature. This chapter, then, is simply a start, a preliminary attempt to map some of the early years of electronic literature in one region of the world: the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s in the United States. For literary works written for computers this was a time of transition from a time when very few and largely disconnected works were created, to a time when many works were created every year, and to when the people who create those works see themselves as contributing to a field. This transition is experienced by every new genre or artistic form as it develops.

THE WORDS WE USE TO DESCRIBE THE FIELD

Before we delve into the electronic literature of the late 1980s, let's consider the term itself. In this chapter, I choose to follow the Electronic Literature Organization's broad and inclusive definition of electronic literature as "works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer." Yet as Lori Emerson points out, this term and definition in itself brought together genres that in many ways were seen as separate in the early years. Emerson writes in her blog-post "On e-literature as a field" that "what did not exist until the founding of the Electronic Literature Organization in 1999 (thanks to Scott Rettberg, Robert Coover, and Jeff Ballowe) is a name, a concept, even a brand with which a remarkably diverse range of digital writing practices could identify: electronic literature."

While it is difficult to pinpoint the date of birth of electronic literature as such, we can say something about the emergence of the terms used to describe literary works that use computational capabilities. I generated Figure 1 using Google's Ngram viewer, asking it to compare the frequency of the terms hypertext fiction, electronic literature, digital literature, digital poetry and e-poetry in books published from 1985 to 2008. Unfortunately it is not currently possible to search more recent books. As the graph shows, Emerson is right in that the term "electronic literature" (marked by the red line) has come to dominate in the period after the Electronic Literature Organization was established. However, in the corpus of print books digitized by Google, at least, both "hypertext fiction" and "digital poetry" are close at its heels, with digital poetry, in particular, looking poised to catch up very soon. The term "e-poetry," although the title of a significant conference in the field since 2001, is not frequently used in print literature, and its purple line is almost invisible, lying flat against the bottom of the chart.

As expected, hypertext fiction (the blue line) was the more popular term in the 1990s, but it also retained its dominance for several years into the 2000s. This could show that the new term "electronic literature" took time to gain general acceptance, or it could also simply be a by-product of the slow pace of scholarship and book publishing. By 2008, the term "electronic literature" is still not as popular as "hypertext fiction" was at its peak, although the combined use of all these terms is growing steadily. It is interesting to see how high the use of "hyper-

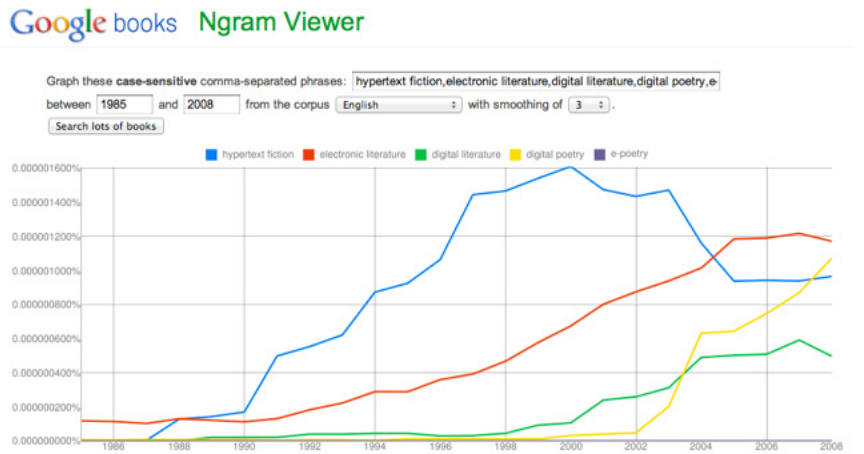

Fig. 1. Google's Ngram Viewer allows us to graph the frequency with which different terms for electronic literature were used in books published between 1985 and 2008. The blue line shows hypertext fiction, the red electronic literature, the green digital literature, the yellow digital poetry and the purple line (flat against the bottom of the graph) is for e-poetry.

text fiction" remains, even after the dominance of "electronic literature." The rapid rise of "digital poetry" is also particularly striking.

It may seem surprising that the term "electronic literature" grows in popularity well before the establishment of the ELO in 1999. However, almost all uses of the term "electronic literature" before the late 1990s refer to research literature that happens to be in electronic form, not to literary works.[2] There are some important exceptions, however. A notable early use of the term in its current usage is from 1985, in an article by Jay David Bolter titled "The Idea of Literature in the Electronic Medium" (1985, 25), and Bolter uses the phrase again in the 1991 edition of *Writing Space*. Ted Nelson's book *Literary Machines* only uses the exact phrase "electronic literature" twice, and in contexts that primarily refer to non-fiction, but still discusses creativity, writing, and authorship and likely had a great deal of influence on thinking in literary terms. A 1992 article in *The Print Collector's Newsletter* mentions that Eastgate publishes electronic literature. In 1995, Robert Kendall uses the term in an article that presents an overview of

2 I have not conducted an exhaustive analysis of all 554 mentions of "electronic literature" that Google finds in books published between 1985 and 1998. This is based on analyzing the titles and surrounding text of the first thirty results, and in these, Bolter's article is the only one to use "electronic literature" in its current sense.

electronic literature at the time, presciently titled "Writing for the New Millennium: The Birth of Electronic Literature."[3] So the term "electronic literature" was in use well before 1999.

A graph like the one shown in Figure 1 comes with its own biases, of course. It only shows how often the terms are used in print, and in a field like electronic literature, a lot of important discussion happens online. While Google has digitized 5.2 million books, that is still only around 4% of all books published (Michel et. al.). Also, we know that most uses of "electronic literature" from before 1999 did not refer to literary works. Although my samples show that the balance shifts after this, we lack a reliable way of filtering out current uses of "electronic literature" that do not refer to literary works using computation. It is also likely that many books that use one term also use another, so that some of the books counted are duplicates. The data that the Ngram Viewer uses can be downloaded, so with time and some programming skills some but not all of these problems could be addressed.

The graph also tells us nothing about which works these books are discussing. Although Google will allow you to click through to individual search results, the whole book is rarely shown. Instead you are only able to see a small section of a page.

BEGINNINGS

Some of my inspiration for this method of studying a field comes from reading Franco Moretti's book *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History*, where he talks about "distant reading" based on large quantities of data about a

3 Unfortunately I have not been able to access the full text of the article from the *Print Collector's Newsletter*, and the snippet that I can view from Google Books does not show the author or title of the essay in question. However, in an email after seeing a preprint version of this article, Mark Bernstein suggested that the full reference may be Nancy Princenthal, "Artists Book Beat", *Print Collector's Newsletter* 23 (2) May-June, 1992, 67-69. Bernstein also reports that a search in his personal email archives found numerous uses of the term "electronic literature" in the mid-nineties, suggesting that the term was in more current use than Google's record of print books would indicate. Examples include "queries from a student who was writing a dissertation on "electronic literature" at Toronto in 1995, an ad from an Italian startup that uses the term in a headline from 1995. A lead to an essay by Michael Shumate titled "Electronic Literature Comes To Duke" in the Spring 1995 issue of Duke's alumni magazine, and a lead to a "conference on electronic literature" named "Version 2.2" that was to be held in Geneva, Switzerland on May 31, 1995."

literary system. For instance, he looked at publication data from different countries, specifically the dates of publication of early novels. From this, he saw that it took about twenty years for the early British novel to grow from a point where only five or six novels were published annually to a critical mass with new novels being published more than once a week. Moretti ran the same test against other countries' statistics, and found that this twenty-year cycle can be seen to repeat itself in a range of countries, though with different starting points according to when novels began to be published in that country: "See how similar those shapes are: five countries, three continents, over two centuries apart, and it's really the same pattern, the same old metaphor of the "rise" of the novel come alive: in twenty years or so (in Britain, 1720-40; Japan, 1745-65; Italy, 1820-40; Spain, 1845- early 1860s; Nigeria, 1965-80), the graph leaps from give-ten new titles per year, which means one new novel every month or two, to one new novel per week" (Moretti 2005, 5). This is the point where the novel has gone from being a novelty to being "a necessity of life" (Moretti 2005, 5).

Has electronic literature gone through a similar cycle? We cannot, today, answer this question accurately. Although there are an increasing number of databases documenting electronic literature, including the ELMCIP Electronic Literature Knowledge Base, which I am involved in, none of these is anywhere near completely documenting the field. Libraries have not documented electronic literature in any systematic way, usually only cataloguing works that have been published in fairly traditional ways, on physical media with ISBN numbers. Visibility in the traditional literary system, whether through libraries or bookshops, is a major reason why Eastgate's hypertext fictions and the *Electronic Literature Collection* have been published on material media (the latter can also be accessed online). Most works of electronic literature are only published online, some completely independently and some in online journals. At the moment, there is no complete overview of all works of electronic literature.

But we can make some assumptions. In 2011, certainly there were new works of electronic literature published at least every week, and probably far more often. In January 2012, the ELMCIP Knowledge Base had fifty-eight records of creative works of electronic literature published in 2011, and there are records of more than thirty creative works every year from the year 2000 onward.

This in itself only means that contributors happen to have entered this many records. Records are entered according to the contributors' interests, and

the Knowledge Base is open to all who are genuinely interested in contributing. Project members document events we attend and enter references from critical works we read and to creative works we find, and we encourage other scholars and practitioners in the field to contribute works they are interested in.[4] We are also working to have teachers use the Knowledge Base in creating curricula and in teaching, and in these cases teachers and students document areas of the field that are on the curriculum. ELMCIP is a European project, so we have recruited contributors from several European countries, aiming for a broader linguistic and cultural coverage. We have many mechanisms for attempting to grow the Knowledge Base broadly and with as little bias as possible. However, there is no guarantee that the selection of works in the Knowledge Base is representative. It does show that there were at least fifty-eight works of electronic literature published in 2011, though, and probably many more that have not yet been registered. Moretti argued that the novel was well established when at least one novel was published every week. With fifty-eight documented works published in 2011, forty-five of which are in English, and presumably many more works not yet documented in the ELMCIP Knowledge Base, we are definitely have reached that point for electronic literature in English, though not within all languages.

Twenty years ago, in 1991, hypertext and other genres of electronic literature were not quite new, and although not many of the early works are now discussed, there were at least one or two dozen works being published each year. By 1986, and maybe earlier, five or six works of electronic literature were being published each year, even without including interactive fiction in the count. By the early 1990s, several publishers existed, including Eastgate, Diskotech, Hyperion SoftWords, Voyager, and Electronic Hollywood.[5] With the advent of the web, self-publishing became even easier, and a number of online journals appeared that published hypertext fictions. By the turn of the century influential organizations such as the Electronic Literature Organization, trAce, and E-Poetry Center were established. So if we are to follow Moretti's twenty year time line for new genres, 1986-2006

4 We have accepted all applications for contributor's accounts from people who have any legitimate interest in the field: students, scholars and writers. We have only turned down people who are clearly spammers and have no record of engagement in the field whatsoever.

5 These and other publishers all have records in the ELMCIP Knowledge Base, with some publications from each attached. We would appreciate contributions from others who know more about the period, publishers and works.

appears to be a reasonable span, although the cycle may have been even briefer for electronic literature.

This is only a preliminary sketch of such a cycle though. To truly map it out, we would need a dataset that was approximately complete. We would want to consider different languages and different nationalities. We should compare the adoption of the different genres, such as kinetic poetry, hypertext fiction, interactive fiction, literary installations and so on, and consider whether each genre grew independently or whether it makes more sense to see electronic literature as a whole.

CITATIONS: WHAT IS REFERENCED?

As I mentioned earlier, I began my research with the assumption that Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story*, really was the "granddaddy" of the field, as Robert Coover wrote in The New York Times in 1992. *afternoon* has been anthologized by Norton, is substantially analyzed and discussed in dozens of academic treatises and is taught or at least mentioned in almost every course taught on electronic literature. I checked citations for *afternoon* and a number of other works of electronic literature across several scholarly databases. Michael Joyce's hypertext fiction *afternoon, a story* is clearly the most frequently cited work of electronic literature, followed by Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*. These two works tower far above the rest of the field.

Fig. 2. shows citations of each of the three most-cited Eastgate works and of three other frequently discussed works of electronic literature. I sampled many works in order to find frequently cited ones. Finally, I chose the two that won the 2001 ELO Awards for poetry and fiction, John Cayley's *windsound* and Caitlin Fisher's *These Waves of Girls* respectively, assuming that the prize would have made them likely to be highly cited. Then, having noticed that works published in the *Electronic Literature Collection* (ELC) appear to be frequently cited, I searched Google Scholar for "electronic literature collection", and saw that Brian Kim Stefans' *The Dreamlife of Letters* had more citations (at least in articles indexed by Google Scholar) than any other works in the two volumes of the ELC. Rather than this somewhat heuristic method of finding the most frequently discussed works of electronic literature, I would have liked to have had a more complete dataset in the Knowledge Base and to have simply run a query of the most frequently cited works there, but we neither have a complete dataset nor the ability to run such a query yet.

So, forced for the moment to be satisfied with this more approximate method, I then took these six works and searched five different scholarly databases for citations: MUSE, ProQuest dissertations and theses, Google Scholar, ELMCIP Knowledge Base, and the ACM Digital Library.

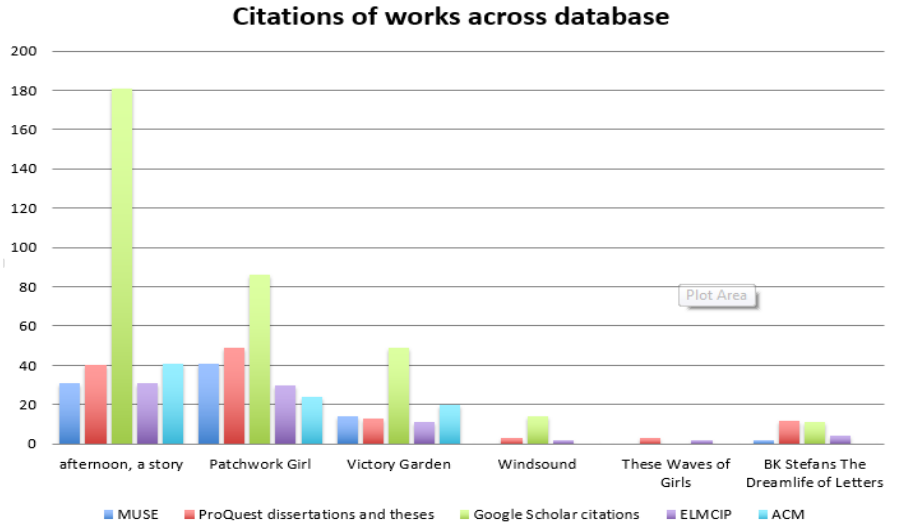

Fig. 2. Chart showing number of citations for selected works of electronic literature.

The first database is MUSE, which provides access to scholarly journals in the humanities and the social sciences. It is represented by the blue columns. ProQuest, indicated by the red columns, indexes dissertations and theses as well as a broad range of scholarship across disciplines, though with less emphasis on the sciences–for example, publications from the ACM Hypertext conference series are not indexed here. The green column shows Google Scholar citations. Google Scholar shows far more references to *afternoon*, in particular, than the other databases do. This is probably because Google Scholar indexes scholarly publications across all fields, not just the humanities, and it also includes sources not included by MUSE and ProQuest, such as peer-reviewed papers on conference websites and in open access research archives. The ACM (Association for Computing Machinery) Hypertext conferences were particularly important in the early years of electronic literature and *afternoon* was first presented at their inaugural conference, The Conference on Hypertext and Hypermedia (Chapel Hill, Nov. 13-15, 1987) and frequently cited in their publications. The turquoise column, which

represents citations in the ACM Digital Library, shows that the Eastgate titles did receive many citations in that community, but the vast number of references found by Google Scholar can still not be accounted for solely by ACM references. It appears that *afternoon*, in particular, has many references from researchers outside of the humanities journals tracked by MUSE and ProQuest and outside of the ACM conference series.

Interestingly, *Patchwork Girl* has more citations in the humanities and social science journals primarily indexed by MUSE and ProQuest. It seems that *afternoon* may have influenced a broader audience of scholars, but that *Patchwork Girl* has influenced literary scholars more heavily. Finally, the purple column shows references in the ELMCIP Knowledge Base, which only tracks the field of electronic literature, but which is not yet complete. At the time of writing, the ELMCIP Knowledge Base is only a little over a year old.

While I have made every effort to find exact figures, there are some possible error sources. When referring to Google Scholar I am not referring to the total number of hits returned when searching for "afternoon, a story" and "Michael Joyce," for instance, but the number of citations specifically assigned to that work by Google Scholar. Sometimes Google Scholar has several versions of the same work, in which case I have collated the results. I have not checked each of the 181 citations of afternoon reported. In most cases, however, the number of results was small enough that I could easily scan through the titles and abstracts and eliminate any false positives. "Windsound" is a variable used in sound installations discussed in some ACM publications that have nothing to do with John Cayley's work, for instance.

In conclusion, the three works published by Eastgate are clearly far more frequently referenced than even the most discussed later works in the field. And *afternoon* is not even the first work of electronic literature, though a casual reader of articles in the field might be forgiven for thinking so. Why did these particular works become a common reference point for scholars and students for the next twenty-five years? There were alternative possibilities. Why didn't bp Nichol's work "First Screening: Computer Poems" (1984) start a movement? Why are there no critical discussions of Judy Malloy's database narrative *Uncle Roger*, published on the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link) in 1986/97? Would electronic literature have been different today if Nichol or Malloy had been crowned as the grandparent of the field?

In 1992, Robert Coover famously called Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story* (1990) the "granddaddy of full-length hypertext fictions" (Coover "The End of Books"), writing only five years after *afternoon* was first presented in public (Bolter and Joyce 1987).[6] Since then, both *afternoon* and Coover's description of it have been cited repeatedly in accounts of the history of electronic literature, whether in books, articles or teaching. The period and its body of work have been called "the Storyspace school" (Aarseth 1997, 85; Hayles 2007) or "the Storyspace era" (Raley 2002, 194; Kirschenbaum 2008), because the field was dominated by works written in the Storyspace software and published by Eastgate. As we have seen, this may not have been entirely true as there were other publishers and self-publishing at the time, but this is how the period looked in hindsight. Later, Coover dubbed these pre-web years "the golden age" (Coover 1999), in part because of the dominance of text. Early hypertext fictions, Coover wrote, gave careful readers a sense of "losing oneself to a text...until clicking the mouse is as unconscious an act as turning a page, and much less constraining, more compelling" (Coover 1999).

How did we come to accept *afternoon* as the unequivocal "granddaddy" of electronic literature (not just full-length hypertext fictions, as Coover in fact wrote)? Although earlier works are regularly mentioned when scholars and teachers recount the history of electronic literature, *afternoon* has certainly become a major reference point and is frequently assumed to be the first work of "real" electronic literature. This amplification and reinforcement of certain ideas, works and citations is typical of a print-centric culture, Elizabeth Eisenstein wrote in her history of print, but perhaps we should say, more broadly, that it is typical of a culture such as ours that privileges that which is recorded, whether analog or digital; written, aural or visual.

BEGINNINGS: MOVING CLOSER

Moretti calls for "distant reading" of literature, and so far that is what I have done in this chapter. I have graphed the use of terms in the field over time, and proposed a twenty year cycle from 1986 to 2006 which marks the movement from works of electronic literature being rare events to the time when they have critical mass and new works are published at least once a week.

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6 *afternoon* was first presented at the ACM Hypertext conference in 1987.

Electronic literature began in many places, at many times. In 1952, in Manchester, computing pioneer Christopher Strachey created a love letter generator (Wardrip-Fruin 2005). In 1966, at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Joseph Weizenbaum created a simulated conversation agent, ELIZA. In 1976 Will Crowther, another Cambridge resident who worked at a technology company, created *Colossal Cave Adventure*, the first textual adventure game, which was then further developed by Stanford graduate student Don Woods.

All these early works were created by computer scientists who were playing with the technology. They did not see themselves as authors, on the contrary, Strachey, Weizenbaum and Crowther all expressed surprise at their experiments being taken seriously by people. They had not intended to create a new form of literature, and were not, as far as we know, building on or even aware of other work in the field. Their work did not immediately start an avalanche of new literary forms. Indeed, they are only recognized as starting points of electronic literature in hindsight (Wardrip-Fruin 2005).

Alongside the experiments created by computer scientists there were nonlinear literary experiments that have also been seen as "proto-hypertexts", and as the starting points of electronic literature—but these were far and few between. Frequently cited examples include Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), Saporta's *Composition No. 1* (1963), Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (1998) and Pavić's *Dictionary of the Khazars* (1988).

There are also examples of works typically classified as visual art that could, in hindsight, equally be called electronic literature. Len Lye's animated texts in film (1937) are one example (Rettberg 2011). Much later, Jenny Holtzer's *Truisms* (1977), slogans and poetic lines of text displayed on tickers on Times Square and elsewhere could certainly have been interpreted as literature.

But none of these works were seen as connected to other works at the time. Although they are important in retrospect, they did not shape a community of electronic literature.

One community of experimental, electronic literature and art in the 1980s met on the WELL (Malloy 1991). Video and performance art curator Carl Loeffler coordinated the Art Com Electronic Network (ACEN) on The WELL where ACEN Datanet, an early online publication, would soon feature actual works of art, including works by John Cage, Jim Rosenberg, and Judy Malloy. Rosenberg's *programmatic poetry Diagrams No. 4* were published here, as was Malloy's data-

base narrative *Uncle Roger*, which was "a hyperfictional narrative database". Malloy's works were also exhibited in physical art exhibitions.

On the opposite coast of the USA, introductions were made through shared friends, by reading papers and journals and at conferences (such as the MacAdemia conferences in Philadelphia in 1988 and at Brown in 1989) and the ACM Hypertext conferences in 1987 and 1989. Stuart Moulthrop describes how at the '89 Hypertext conference he and John McDaid, Michael Joyce and Jay Bolter sat at a computer connected to the internet and searched for other people doing similar things. They found Judy Malloy's work:

> It was just like blues men going to each other's performances. Yeah, alright, oh darn that's good. Oh, we're not that good. So we really recognized that she was somebody, and she was part of a community out there in the Bay Area that was really important and exciting. I can remember coming away from that moment thinking that, you know, there might be a real hope for what we were trying to do because other people were doing it (Moulthrop, interview).

In an interview with Ransom Center archivist Gabriela Redwine, Michael Joyce described how he came to realize that there was a community of readers passing works around informally even before there was a publisher or any of the institutions that conventionally support literature:

> So—you had a physical community [of readers], like a book community. Same thing—similar story—with Jane [Yellowlees] Douglas when she first called me up and said I'm writing my dissertation on *afternoon*. I said, "That's impossible, you can't be, it's not published." She said, "Well, no, but I have it, you know. I've gotten it through so-and-so." So we were pretty much aware there was a community of readers out there (Joyce 2011, interview).

By the late eighties, several tools were available for creating electronic literature, including HyperCard and Storyspace. Additionally, many practitioners did their own programming, such as Nichol, Malloy, and Rosenberg.

Eastgate became a central node in the hypertext fiction communities, as the primary publisher of literary hypertext. In an interview with Judy Malloy, Bernstein explained that he saw one of Eastgate's goals as providing shared references for the growing hypertext research community. The hypertext research field was growing, but before the web it was characterized by diverse, locally developed authoring systems. By publishing a series of hypertext fictions written in the same system, East-

gate managed to create a shared set of references: "These hypertexts helped focus discussion. For the first time, if you and I wanted to talk about the craft of hypertext writing, we could talk about a specific work we'd both read, a work with some ambition and scope, a work we could admire and with which we might disagree" (Bernstein email interview with Malloy 2010).

As previously mentioned, Eastgate succeeded in creating what we may call a canon of electronic literature, and works published by Eastgate in the early 1990s are still taught and written about today. At the time, there were other publishers, including Voyager and Electronic Hollywood, but they no longer exist, whereas Eastgate, small as it is, and by no means mainstream, is still selling copies of those same hypertexts. Eastgate has been frequently criticized because it does not make works available on the web but instead only distribute works on disk, and because works have not always remained accessible on current operating systems. However, it is clear that works published by Eastgate in the early 1990s have been more frequently cited and taught than contemporaneous works that were self-published or published by publishers that later shut down.

Although originally a software company, when marketing electronic literature, Eastgate modeled itself on a traditional literary publishing model. This allowed them to fit into a literary system. Despite their works being published on diskettes and CD-ROMs instead of on paper, they had ISBN numbers and were packaged so they could easily slip into a bookshelf. By claiming the position of a small literary publisher, Eastgate found a way to give legitimacy to electronic literature. Bernstein himself expresses this quite directly: "I think that the presence of a publisher did matter, especially to critics, ironically. In particular the fact that there was a publisher that looked like a recognizable sort of organization gave the critics a chance to pitch their stories to their editors, and editors who were inclined to find a technological line, or at least not repulsed by the idea of literary machines, could be convinced, since there was something that looked like a small press. That was important" (Interview, 29 June 2011).

In addition to publishing Storyspace works, Eastgate also published works written in other authoring systems, and in some cases, ported work written in other systems to Storyspace. For instance, Malloy's *Penelope* was first written in BASIC, but Bernstein gave it the "Storyspace look and feel" and incorporated generative aspects of the work into Storyspace when the work was republished by Eastgate in 1993 (Malloy, email message to author, 29 June 2011). In this way,

Eastgate served to gather much diverse activity, incorporating earlier works into its catalog, including pioneering authors on The WELL like Judy Malloy and Jim Rosenberg.

At the same time, hypertext fiction was beginning to enter the college classroom. Among the most well-known teachers of hypertext of the time were George Landow and Robert Coover at Brown University, and Janet Murray who taught at MIT at the time. Landow, Coover and Murray wrote extensively about the field as well (Landow's book *Hypertext* was published in three print editions, in 1992, 1997 and 2006, as well as in a hypertextual edition published by Eastgate in 1994), and each is frequently cited.

FIVE CATEGORIES OF EARLY ELECTRONIC LITERATURE

Why are certain works more frequently cited than others? Obviously literary quality is one answer, but contextual circumstances are also extremely important, and it is the context and the community I am interested in this chapter. Thinking about which works of early electronic literature are still remembered today and which are not we can think in terms of five categories. These categories do not correspond to genres or literary qualities, but to the ways in which works were disseminated, documented and preserved.

1. There are many examples of isolated experiments that are regularly offered as examples of proto-hypertext or very early electronic literature, although they are more often mentioned as part of an obligatory literature review at the start of a paper than they are analyzed or discussed in detail. Examples are Christopher Strachey's M.U.C. Love Letter Generator and Weizenbaum's ELIZA. These works were not really intended as literature, but in hindsight have clearly literary qualities. Paper hypertexts may also be included in this category, such as Cortázar's *Hopscotch* and Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. These were not intended to be electronic literature, but in hindsight have many qualities that correspond to genres of electronic literature.
2. The second category of early electronic literature is the canon, as we might call it, the works that have been taught again and again in colleges and universities and that are frequently mentioned and discussed

in scholarly works on the field. These correspond to a selection of what several authors have called "the Storyspace school".

3. Works published by now defunct publishers may have received some critical acclaim at the time, but are no longer readily available and are rarely if ever mentioned in current discourse on electronic literature.
4. Self-published works. Before the web, self-publishing was more complicated than it is on the web, because authors had to make physical copies on diskette and distribute these. Without dedicated points of distribution, such as through a publisher or journal or software company, wide distribution was rare and perhaps non-existent. Even after the web, many early self-published web works are no longer available, either because the website has not been maintained, because the domain has lapsed or because the software or the web browser required to view the work is not compatible with current systems. It is true that in 2012, even Eastgate's works from the early 1990s no longer work on contemporary computers, although they have certainly had far greater durability than most other works of that period. But because Eastgate is still in existence, there is ongoing work to create new versions of the reader software for Storyspace, and to create iPad versions of selected works.[7]
5. Some works, as today, were performed on an electronic network (as was the first publication of Judy Malloy's *Uncle Roger* in 1986, when nuggets of text were posted to discussion boards), and so of course can no longer be experienced as originally intended. There have been many works since that require synchronous experience, or that can be said to be performed as much as they are published. Works that are sent to mailing lists or that are told as a series of emails or tweets and other social networks are examples, and so are works that are constructed in MOOs, such as Coover and his students' Hypertext Ho-

7 On Twitter on January 13, 2012, Mark Bernstein promised new versions of Storyspace fictions to work in Lion OS for Macs in the Autumn of 2012, and wrote that iPad versions were on their way: "@jilltxt @stevehimmer windows: use xp compat mode. Lion: new editions will be out by fall. iPad coming too." One reason for the *Electronic Literature Collection* being published with a Creative Commons license was to allow future readers the freedom to create their own ways of accessing the works when the Flash and XHTML of the early 2000s is no longer accessible. The PAD program for the Preserving, Archiving and Dissemination of Electronic Literature is one initiative that attempts to provide better frameworks to solve the question of technological obsolescence.

tel or the literary environments in LambdaMOO in the early 1990s. Without careful documentation, such works are easily forgotten, as they, unlike static websites or CD-ROMs, do not exist in their original form after their original performance.

CONCLUSION

The works of electronic literature that are still remembered from the 1980s have enjoyed the attention of scholars, publishers, teachers, and authors who have remained in the field for a long time. Although Eastgate did not begin publishing hypertext fiction and poetry until 1990s, it is the Eastgate versions of earlier, self-published works that are still remembered. Works published by now-defunct publishers are orphaned and rarely discussed, largely because they are no longer accessible. At the same time, the social networks around conferences and teaching institutions were key, as were online groups such as the ArtCom forum on the WELL. These online groups may no longer be remembered by many, but they served to connect authors and artists who then went on to receive a wider audience. I have not found any examples of solely self-published works that have been continuously discussed in the two decades of scholarship and teaching since the 1980s, although some works have been recently revived and made accessible again and are now receiving new attention, such as bp Nichol's BASIC poems.

Working on this article I have realized how much more there is to learn about these early days of hypertext and electronic literature. What appears clear at this point is that works that were self-published have tended to be forgotten. Whether this is simply because they ceased to be available or because they were never much discussed due to a lack of social and artistic connections (i.e. nobody was aware of the works in the first place) is not easy to ascertain as the discussions, online or off, of the time are not generally archived. Of course, publishing with an established publisher was no guarantee for being written into the history books either. Voyager was a far larger company than Eastgate in the early 1990s, and many works published by them received great critical acclaim at the time, but their works are no longer available.[8] With the advent of the web, these dynamics

8 Examples are Amanda Goodenough's children's stories *AmandaStories* (1991), James Petrillo's *Cinema Volta* (1994) and Laurie Anderson's *Puppet Motel* (1995).

changed significantly, and today we also have many conferences, journals, college classes and organizations focused on electronic literature.

I have tried to use digital methods in examining the history of electronic literature, both bibliographically looking at citations of certain works, and extracting data about the use of terms for electronic literature in printed books. We are at the cusp of being able to use far more powerful tools than these in our readings of electronic literature and of other cultural fields of practice, and I look forward to seeing much more research conducted along these lines.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND FURTHER INFORMATION

This chapter has been written as part of the ELMCIP project (Developing a Network-Based Creative Community: Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice), a collaborative research project funded by Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) JRP for Creativity and Innovation. My research has relied heavily on the ELMCIP Knowledge Base, where I and many other contributors have entered and cross-referenced information about electronic literature from its beginnings until today. You will find a great deal more information about electronic literature in the 1980s and beyond in the Knowledge Base, and you are also welcome to contribute more knowledge there. There may well be omissions and mistakes in my retelling of the 1980s, and I would welcome feedback and corrections.

We welcome new contributors to the ELMCIP Knowledge Base. You can request an account from the website.

DISTRIBUTED AUTHORSHIP AND CREATIVE COMMUNITIES

BY SIMON BIGGS AND PENNY TRAVLOU

In its requirement, for both an author and reader, art can be considered a participatory activity. Expanded concepts of agency allow us to question what or who can be an active participant, allowing us to revisit the debate on authorship from alternate perspectives. We can ask whether creativity might be regarded as a form of social interaction, rather than an outcome. How might we understand creativity as interaction between people and things, as sets of discursive relations rather than outcomes?

Whilst creativity is often perceived as the product of the individual artist, or creative ensemble, it can also be considered an emergent phenomenon of communities, driving change and facilitating individual or ensemble creativity. Creativity can be a performative activity released when engaged through and by a community and understood as a process of interaction.

In this context the model of the solitary artist who produces artifacts which embody creativity is questioned as an ideal for achieving creative outcomes. Instead, creativity is proposed as an activity of exchange that enables (creates) people and communities. In his book *Creative Land,* anthropologist James Leach describes cultural practices where the creation of new things, and the ritualized forms of exchange enacted around them, function to "create" individuals and bind them in social groups, "creating" the community they inhabit. Leach's argument is an interesting take on the concept of the gift-economy and suggests it is possible to conceive of creativity as emergent from and innate to the interactions of people. Such an understanding might then function to combat an instrumentalist view of creativity that demands of artists that their creations have social (e.g.: "economic") value. In the argument proposed here, creativity is not valued as arising from a perceived need, a particular solution or product, nor from a "blue skies" ideal, but as an emergent property of communities.

This chapter seeks to articulate these issues, identifying a set of core questions and describing the context within which they will be addressed, indicating how these questions are at the center of the pan-European Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice (ELMCIP) collaborative research project, undertaken from 2010-2013 and funded through the Humanities

in the European Research Area Joint Research Program. The paper examines a specific example of a creative community and outlines the research methods we employ during our field work. The paper concludes with an outline of our expected outcomes.

A previous version of this article was presented at the Society for Literature, Science and the Arts conference, Riga Latvia, in June 2010 and will be published in the conference proceedings.

INTRODUCTION

This text is written within the context of a research project being undertaken by a team that includes the authors. The authors have backgrounds in interdisciplinary arts and digital poetics (Biggs) and geography and ethnography (Travlou). This text reflects the shared but distinct research foci and methods of the authors.

The primary research questions are:

- How do creative communities, amateur and professional, form and interact through distributed media? What are the affects of these processes upon creative practice and its outcomes?
- What are the models for creative communities in the field of electronic literature? What forces, such as diverse linguistic heritages, affect the development of such communities? What general insights do these models facilitate?
- How might education function in the development and formation of electronic literature communities? What are the implications for and models available to educators?
- How do electronic literature practices link to networks and materialize in culturally and linguistically specific contexts? How might innovation emerge in this context?

This particular text seeks to address and articulate, in greater detail, aspects of the first and last questions and specifically asks how distributed networks facilitate and affect the formation of creative communities and the creative outcomes associated with them and how we might understand such communities. A key apprehension that informs our approach to these questions is that art can be considered as essentially participatory, as a form of cultural exchange. This is in

contrast to the often more generally held understanding that creativity is a property and outcome of individual intent. This text will articulate in greater detail our questions, outline the context of the research, provides an example of a subject of analysis and describes the methods we employ, particularly as regards the ethnographic fieldwork component of our program of activities. It will conclude with our activities going forward and a description of our anticipated outcomes.

CREATIVE COMMUNITIES, AUTHORSHIP, AND BECOMING

There are numerous examples of communities that are facilitated by and seek to explore creativity. These range from professional associations to amateur groups through to the more motile and diffuse communities often found where less formalized creative practices represent the common interest. Network technologies have impacted upon the mediation of such communities and how they might evolve. In some instances it is likely that particular communities would not exist if it had not been for the role of network technologies in their formation whilst in other instances the character of an existing community has been significantly affected. Given the centrality of networking (here we do not just mean computer networks) in the formation of any community it is not at all surprising that changes in the technologies that define networking and networks will have far reaching consequences.

Here we can consider creativity, and subsequent knowledge formation, as forms of social interaction rather than the outcomes of social activities. Creative social interaction occurs in communities that develop and evolve as cultural paradigms crystallize or dissipate. This would seem to be a reflexive process involving complex interactions of agency and becoming. Particular creative communities can act as a lens through which social change may be observed. Examples from networked culture can include large-scale communities of dispersed interests, such as Facebook (2010), and specialist professional communities with finely focused interests, such as the community of creative practitioners, working with networked technologies, associated with Rhizome (2010).

Thus, whilst we commonly perceive creativity as the product of the individual artist, or creative ensemble, from this perspective creativity can also be considered an emergent phenomenon of communities, driving change and facilitating individual or ensemble creativity. Creativity can be a performative activity released when engaged through and by a community. Within this context

we accept Latour's concept of actor-network-theory as useful in expanding our appreciation of what the "players" in this process can be, involving individuals, groups, apparatus, and systems. Thus creativity can be understood as a process of interaction within a complex field of agency—a field so complex that Tim Ingold identifies the concept of agency as the outcome of a reductive logic; "to render the life of things as the agency of objects is to effect a double reduction, of things to objects and of life to agency" (2008, 12).

In this context the model of the solitary artist, producing artifacts that embody creativity, can be questioned as an ideal for achieving creative outcomes. Instead, creativity can be proposed as an activity of exchange that enables (creates) people and communities, considering these processes within an expanded field of what agency can be considered to be, as a collective becoming. James Leach, in his book *Creative Land*, observes and describes cultural practices where the creation of new things, and the ritualized forms of exchange enacted around them, function to "create" individuals and bind them in social groups, thus "creating" the community they inhabit. Leach has observed "the role of 'creativity' in the ways people generate new places in the landscape" and has argued:

> …in so doing, they also generate new people, who emerge from these places, and objects which facilitate or even participate in these creative processes. Making people and places involves relations to other people and to spirits and ancestors that embody, through song/design/dance complexes, the generative potential of land itself (Biggs and Leach 2004).

Leach's argument is an interesting development of Mauss's concept of the gift-economy, emphasizing its transformative potential. In this context creativity, as a performative instance of exchange, can be considered as emergent from and innate to the interactions of people, whether in a landscape or a network.

Ingold describes such eliciting of creativity as less a quality of interactions than "lines along which things continually come into being. Thus when I speak of the entanglement of things I mean this literally and precisely: not a network of connections but a meshwork of interwoven lines of growth and movement" (2008, 4). Such an understanding of creativity, as an ontology where agency and becoming are dynamic qualities between things (including people), can function to combat the currently fashionable (within government and the corporate world) instrumentalist view of creativity, which demands of artists, and others,

that their creations have a clear social (e.g.: "economic") value. In the argument proposed here creativity is not valued as arising from a perceived need, a particular solution or product, nor from a supply-side "blue skies" ideal, but as an emergent property of relations, of communities.

Complicating this field of fluid relations further are the implications of what happens when forms of agency are incorporated into the network of relations that underpin creative activity which are artificial systems or artifacts in their own right. As has already been noted, networks of agency can, and often do, include non-human things within their constitution. The Internet is possibly the largest and most pervasive example of such mediation.

In this context we can again ask what "creativity" is? We can seek to situate it as an activity defined by and defining of communities, transcending the debate on the instrumentality of creativity and knowledge and situating innovation as an ontological factor in the formation of communities. An analysis of the performative in creative practice becomes possible, seeking to understand how various agents' interactions, in the symbolic as well as material realm, can lead to social transformation or the emergence of alternate social conditions. This approach allows for the deconstruction of traditional perceptions of creative activities and the development of a less reductive understanding of its value. This leads directly to fundamental questions regarding the public value of creativity and the role it plays in creating communities—with creativity proposed as a process of becoming for individuals and communities, where immanence can be understood as an interaction between various agents which leads to the unfolding of being through an exchange of symbolic value. The intention here is less to evoke the Deleuzian abstraction of a "plane of immanence" than to socially situate the construction of self within the interplay of relationships between individuals and communities, with the role of creativity thus emerging as an ontological determiner. The cultural economies of exchange and becoming, as described by Leach, are regarded here as the pertinent examples.

COMMUNITIES IN THE NET

There are numerous examples of creative communities that have emerged since the World Wide Web was first popularized in the early 1990s. Such communities are well documented in specialist literature but also in mainstream publications, such as Thames and Hudson's World of Art series book *Internet Art* (Greene).

Some of these communities, which often take the network as a metaphor to describe themselves, exist only, or primarily, in the online environment. The community of practitioners and writers around the 7-11 listserv of the mid 1990s is a good example. This group included a number of key practitioners of what came to be known as net.art, including Vuk Ćosić, Alexei Shulgin, Oila Lialina and Heath Bunting, founder of Irrational.org (2010). Some of these artists were also prominent practitioners of a certain kind of approach to electronic literature, often involving the conflation of computer coding and literary practices. The group was also typified by certain geographical congruencies, with many of its associates working in the emerging democracies of the ex-Warsaw pact, but was nevertheless a community that formed and primarily interacted through the virtual space of the Internet and specifically the listserv protocol.

7-11 was far from the first such online creative community and was itself one of a number of splinter groups from earlier communities, including many members who had gathered around the Net-Time mailing list (2010) in the early-mid 1990s. The grandmother of all these communities was probably the Art Com Electronic Network (Kostelanetz), which was founded by Carl Loeffler and Fred Truck in 1985. As part of The Well online community, in San Francisco, Art Com was associated with Stewart Brand's advocacy of new models of communities and social organization, as espoused in the *Whole Earth Catalogue* (Brand 1970). Fred Turner has written on how aspects of contemporary cyber-culture can be traced back to the counter cultural experiments of the 1960s (1987) and this is a history we will explore further, as our research develops, seeking to understand and contextualize the (often idealistic) motivations that underpin the genesis of contemporary creative communities.

Ultimately, 7-11 splintered as the key individuals associated with it evolved their own distinct and sometimes incompatible approaches to practice as artists, activists, and theorists. Indeed, the interpersonal dynamics that to some degree determined how these various communities formed, merged, and split could form the basis of an interesting narrative which could evoke memories of earlier examples involving strong personalities often coming into conflict (the Impressionists, Dadaists, or Surrealists could be prior examples). However, although these earlier communities of artists were international in character they depended largely on the co-location of their primary members, in Paris, Berlin, or Zurich. The sort of cre-

ative communities we are seeking to engage are often characterized by their geographical dispersion.

It is important to note here that there are numerous potential examples of creative communities that exist primarily due to the emergence of the web, some of significant longevity, such as The Thing in New York (2010), others with more specific socio-cultural remits, such as the Sarai-Reader-List (2010), and others that have transformed from informal networks into established organizations, such as Rhizome (2010), now part of New York's New Museum. However, at this stage, we will identify and primarily discuss one.

FURTHERFIELD

Furtherfield is an online community that shares a number of characteristics with the communities mentioned above, as well as others. Furtherfield has a short "manifesto" that maps out its raison d'etre and succinctly situates its aims and objectives as being within the immediate focus of our research project:

> Furtherfield.org believes that through creative and critical engagement with practices in art and technology people are inspired and enabled to become active co-creators of their cultures and societies. Furtherfield.org provides platforms for creating, viewing, discussing and learning about experimental practices at the intersections of art, technology and social change.

Based in North London, Furtherfield was founded by Ruth Catlow and Marc Garrett and also involves Neil Jenkins and Michael Szpakowski, two of the UK's better known net artists. Mez Breeze, the internationally renowned Australian code-poet and net-artist and a former member of 7-11 and Net-Time, is also a close associate, amongst a web of some 26,000 contributors, including other international artists, theorists, and activists, many of whom know one another primarily through the virtual connections established and mediated by network initiatives such as Furtherfield. Whilst Furtherfield is a community with a core of members who are central to its formation and continuity it also exists in other forms, including as a listserv, with around 1,000 active members, known as Netbehavior, and the Furtherfield Gallery (formerly known as the HTTP art gallery—House of Technologically Termed Praxis), which specializes in presenting networked and new media arts, located in suburban North London.

NetBehaviour exists as "an open email list community" that engages in "the process of sharing and actively evolving critical approaches, methods and ideas focused around contemporary networked media arts practice". Its diverse membership includes artists working with networked media, researchers, academics, writers, code-geeks, curators, activists, and others. It is the stated aim of the Netbehaviour listserv to encourage "individuals, small groups of mutual interest and representatives of organizations to announce and promote their own projects and events" through the exchange of related concepts, ideas, information and resources. It is a community that situates itself as "a place where creative minds can share contemporary ideas and concepts, without either the censorship or endorsement of a centrally imposed hierarchical canon." Perhaps its most powerful self-defined descriptor, and one that explicitly evokes our core research question, reads:

> We are the medium—the context—the source of networked creativity.

This statement eloquently identifies individuals and communities as the determinants of mediality and situates this collective activity as the source of creativity, unconsciously channeling James Leach's observations on the role of creativity and exchange in the mediation of self and community, as described in his book on the people's of the Rai Coast. Further to this, in the book *Autopoeisis: Novelty, Meaning and Value*, we argue that:

> … such self generating social systems have been described as auto-poetic and mytho-poetic, following Luhmann; that is, systems of relations between persons in reciprocal and dynamic relation with conceptual and discursive schema (Biggs and Leach 2004).

Aside from its online existence Furtherfield also exists at a physical location, the Furtherfield Gallery. The gallery seeks to be a "dedicated space for media art," providing a platform for "creating, viewing, discussing and learning about experimental practices in art, technology and social change." Like most other private art galleries, Furtherfield Gallery features a regularly changing exhibition program and also hosts other events, such as concerts, performances and readings. Well-established new media artists that have shown their work at Furtherfield Gallery include Annie Abrahams, Stanza, Susan Collins and Irrational.org. However, unlike commercial private galleries, Furtherfield Gallery is funded by the Arts Council of England and other public bodies and functions

as a non-profit artist-run space. It seeks to "initiate and provide infrastructure for commissions, events, exhibitions, internships, networking, participatory projects, peer exchange, publishing, research, residencies and workshops" (Furtherfield). These are self-determined responsibilities which would rarely appear in the mission statements of private galleries and, indeed, many public museums and galleries. They are not even activities one usually associates with experimental art spaces, with the clear commitment to and prioritization of collective and public activities engaging both professional and non-professional communities. Whilst having gained public support for their activities Furtherfield remains an independent community and set of associated activities that have resisted institutionalization, even at a small scale. They have probably achieved this through retaining and foregrounding their focus on being a community and engaging other communities without recourse to an instrumentalized producer/consumer binary model of culture.

Due to these reasons, as outlined above, we believe that Furtherfield presents an exemplar for the type of creative community our research seeks to engage.

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF A NETWORKED COMMUNITY AS EMERGENT CREATIVITY

Ethnography is "a decoding operation" (Apgar) where the researcher is required to learn the verbal and symbolic languages of the community under observation and to decipher the codes that underlie its existence, from an insider's perspective. This involves immersion into the community and a methodological toolkit to facilitate decoding through (participant) observation and in-depth interviews with community members. Bate suggests ethnography can be considered as a text that "drops the reader into the social setting, reveals the mundane and everyday, and delivers both a point and a punch line" (qtd. in Howard 213). In this context, ethnography may be of particular use in capturing and evaluating community symbols, since both observation and in-depth interviews allow the researcher to probe for meaning and watch symbolic communities interact and evolve (Howard, "Network Ethnography") within territorial boundaries. In support of this argument we could follow the approach of symbolic anthropologists who claim that a community is nothing more than a matter of "boundary construction through identity and shared systems of meaning" (Cohen qtd. in Guimarães 2005, 146). This definition makes a direct reference to the spatiality of the community and

thus to ethnography's role as a methodology to decipher not only symbolic codes and meanings, but also to map territoriality and the physical presence of the community.

Obviously, the above discussion is about traditional ethnographic methods used to study spatially located settings and boundary-defined communities. What happens however when those communities are aterritorial, or at least not located in physical space? What kind(s) of ethnography could researchers use to describe aspatial communities such as those occurring on the Internet? In her paper "Mediating Ethnography: Objectivity, and the Making of Ethnographies of the Internet," Beaulieu poses the question: "how is ethnography being challenged and reinvented in its encounter with…the internet [sic] in particular?" Looking at the recent (often heated) discussion on the epistemological position of ethnography in the postmodern academy, it is rather obvious that the ethnographic project is in crisis (Wittel 2000). Some of the threads that ethnography is called to disentangle are linked with new communication technologies (including the Internet) and the challenges these raise for researchers when spatially located, territorially specific social interactions are not present in those (non-physical) environments. Going back to Beaulieu's paper, she argues that—in general—technology has been considered as a barrier to the ethnographic project and thus partly responsible for the crisis in ethnography. According to this argument, online communities have been viewed as "illusory" when enacted on the Internet due to the lack of real spatial relationships (Beaulieu 2004; Calhoun 1991). On the other hand, there are those who foresee the benefit from and support ethnographic research of online communities (Hakken 1999; Pink 2000; Amit 2000; Hine 2000; Wilson and Peterson 2002; Beaulieu 2004). For instance, Hakken claims that online ethnographies can facilitate the discussion about multiple identities and the dynamism of (online) communities while Amit notes that the Internet might offer new definitions of community. This last possibility is of particular interest as we are looking at transcultural, transnational, and nomadic communities. Following Amit's argument of the shift of anthropology towards the investigation of multi-sited communities, we look at fluid, mobile, and changing communities that are not static but dynamic and in constant movement across geographies.

Regarding the epistemological position of online ethnography, there are some fundamental questions that need to be taken into consideration, such as: the place of the fieldwork in relation to both participant observation and inter-

viewing; the position of the researcher; the interaction between ethnographer and participant(s); the form of field notes; and the type of data analysis. Hine encourages online ethnographers to take an adaptive approach to address the distinctive features of online communities. This approach needs to consider the above questions and particularly the aspatial nature of such communities. The first challenge for the ethnographer, before fieldwork is designed, concerns how they immerse into such a community? Just because a researcher does not have to physically travel to a site, they will still have to:

> "case the scene", create a strategy for entering and getting access, engage the culture, slowly get to know people, create a strategy for observing and listening via text, create categories, engage in ongoing and even constant comparative analysis over time, than the amount of time taken, minus physical logistics, to do conventional ethnography (Thomsen et al. 1998).

This quote evidences some of the issues that the present study will have to consider throughout its different stages. What follows is both a presentation of the research outline and a discussion of the questions that the researcher will be called to answer during the ethnographic study.

This project uses an ethnographic methodological approach to gather valuable information first on the interpretation and second on the performativity of 'creativity' by electronic literature practitioners—both professional and amateur—within a transnational and multicultural context. The project follows an ethnographic methodology that is customized to meet the particular character of the case studies under investigation, such as Furtherfield. This is: a) a multi-sited global ethnography (Marcus 1995; Burawoy 2000, Hendry 2003); and, b) a cyber-ethnography (Ward 1999; Hine 2000; Carter 2005).

The first type of ethnography that this study adopts is global ethnography or, otherwise, "globography" (Hendry 2003). Global ethnography allows the description of discourse amongst members of a creative community who communicate through new global forms of technology (e.g. the Internet) and exist (primarily) because of these forms of technology. The Furtherfield community, as we have already observed, is characterized by both its physically geo-specific and virtually online and distributed community identities; a duality that appears to be mutually supportive. To acquire an understanding of how such a community interacts, communicates and exchanges knowledge, within a transnational context,

the research uses ethnographic methods that involve multiple sites of observation, which cut across the dichotomies of the "local" and the "global."

The second type of ethnography that this study uses is cyber-ethnography. As virtual communities only exist if their members perceive them to (Hine 2000) then rather than assuming the community as subject, as occurs in conventional ethnography, cyber-ethnography allows the participants to take the lead role in establishing the reality, status, and principles of the community. The boundaries of such communities tend to be flexible and change according to the ways their participants define them. In virtual networks the ethos of community appears more important than a sense of place. Such communities can be based around common interests rather than shared geographic territories. Identity is not entirely a function of location.

Our project looks primarily at Furtherfield which has been described above and through it at two other case studies: Art is Open Source, an Italian artist duo who develop ubiquitous publishing through co-creative practices and Make-Shift, a cyberformance community. The initial stage of the study has concentrated on Furtherfield, an internet-based creative community to research the concept of "creativity" in an online (virtual) environment. Following Marcus's approach, the ethnographic research is constructed in the following stages:

1. Follow the community,
2. follow the artifact (i.e. electronic literature, performances, installations),
3. follow the metaphor (signs, symbols and metaphors that guide the ethnography),
4. follow the story/narrative (comparison of stories with fieldwork notes from observation),
5. follow the life/biography (gather individual stories/experiences),
6. follow the conflict (if any between transnational communities, e.g. copyright laws),
7. and follow the rhizome.

The latter stage (i.e. follow the rhizome) has been added to Marcus' ethnographic framework to respond to the nature of the networked communities under investigation. These are communities that believe in non-hierarchical, multi-

voiced co-creative practices where knowledge and creativity is not only shared by but also multiplies across members and groups. The ethnographic study consists of interviews—both on and offline—with members of Furtherfield and (participant) observation in both virtual and real space. In support of this mixed-methods approach, Hine and Orgad encourage online ethnographers to use a combination of online and offline methodologies, such as interviews with community members, to triangulate findings and thus increase the validity of interpretation. Likewise, Bruckman stresses the importance of an "offline component" on online ethnographies to allow not only triangulation of data but also a broader picture of the social context in which the community is embedded.

However, this shift from online to offline and back to online research raises some ethical issues regarding the position of the ethnographer within the fieldwork setting. First, there is an ethical issue when approaching notions of what kind of space online ethnography takes place in as it challenges the invisibility of the researcher. "The online ethnographer faces the issue of 'being there' while also, in a non-trivial sense, 'not being there'" (Rutter and Smith 2005, 91). Once again the idea of visibility proves to be central. Whereas in a physical environment the ethnographer's physical presence can act as a reminder of the presence of an agent, online presence turns out to be a very "nebulous" thing (Rutter and Smith 2005; Agre 1994). One way to overcome this problem is to create transparency in the research process by informing the participants about the project's objectives and eventual outcomes during and after fieldwork. In this project this is achieved through the use of an interactive wiki, a form of community accessible and collaboratively authored fieldwork diary, where the ethnographer regularly updates notes from observations and communication with research participants who have access to and input into the wiki. Finally, the wiki is used as a communication tool between the other researchers in the project and the members of the case studies. However, here there is potential to encounter another ethical dilemma, that of anonymity and the public/private status of the wiki. Therefore, there will be separate wikis for each case study and password protected access will be available to the researcher and participants.

Over the past decade the "blog" and wikis have been used by a number of researchers to constitute various aspects of their ethnographies (Beaulieu 2004). The platform has been flexibly used for a range of purposes that were traditionally pursued in different media and which addressed clearly differentiated audiences.

Mortensen and Walker stress the multiple uses of blogging in online ethnographies that take a hybrid form between journal, fieldwork memo, academic publishing, storage for links, and site for academic discourse (Mortensen and Walker 2002). In this way, the blog could serve not only as an annotated set of bookmarks, but also to document the research process, demonstrating its complexity, creativity and difficulty. Blogs might facilitate ethnographers to create the object of their investigation and render visible their subjectivity and self-reflexivity, being both a context and a mode of communication, a hybrid tool for making, presenting and reflecting on the object that is furthermore exposed in a new way. Thus, "blogs [can] become a workspace for the ethnographer" (Beaulieu 2004, 151; Mortensen and Walker 2002, 250).

As the Internet is composed of texts (in the broadest sense) they can be seen as ethnographic material which evidence the creative processes engaged by their authors and their particular community. The positionality of those texts is interesting to the investigation as they are mobile (communicators between participants in creative communities). In other terms, a "mediated quasi-interaction" (Thompson 1995) is facilitated by the texts. The mobility of such texts, enabled by mediated quasi-interaction, addresses the situated writing and reading practices (and other creative practices) which make those texts (and other artifacts) meaningful. This is something that can be seen as especially self-evident, even reflexive, within the communities of electronic literature practitioners, such as Furtherfield. This type of ethnography can be called "textography" (Swales 1998) as it combines the analysis of texts with an understanding of their relationship with other texts and the working lives of their authors/creators.

Ethnography is about text and writing so the question for online ethnography is: how can it be adapted to new communications media and concepts of writing? This becomes the primary resource and the location of the research interface, with the participant(s) having access to and a voice within the ethnographic project. That the participants are, in the case of Furtherfield, working as online creative practitioners, with writing central to that, offers a particularly evocative context for such work.

CONCLUSION

As stated at the outset of this text, this research inquires into how creative communities form and interact within networked media, how these processes affect

creative practice, how electronic literature practices materialize in these contexts and how innovation emerges from that.

The text outlines the context within which these questions are addressed, with particular reference to the recent anthropological investigations of James Leach and Tim Ingold and how these relate to the analysis of creativity and community undertaken by Bruno Latour. The key objective has been to transcend the quotidian instrumentalization of creativity in the arts, humanities, and sciences, routinely required by government and industry, and to assert that the value of creativity need not to be restricted to material or conceptual outcomes but rather appreciated more fully as a foundation for the performative inter-personal interactions that allow communities to identify themselves and develop their praxis as social groups.

A number of examples of communities which exemplify distributed creative practices working within or in areas sympathetic to the practices of electronic literature were identified and discussed, with a particular focus on Furtherfield, a network of creative practitioners, theorists, curators, and activists with a strong presence within both the globalized environment of the internet and the local environment of London. Furtherfield and the other examples (i.e. Art is Open Source and Make-Shift) were considered in relation to the facilitation of community formation and the affects this process of creative becoming has on the creative practices associated with such communities.

Finally, various research methods in ethnography were considered, asking how they might be of value in engaging various specific creative communities, with particular consideration for how various methodologies will be more or less appropriate in contexts where factors such as community and territory, localism and globalism, similarity and difference, often exist in motile forms beyond our usual expectations. A type of cyber-ethnography has been identified as most appropriate to engage the technically literate, creative, dispersed, and fluid character of the communities the project seeks to engage, accepting that there will be unknown factors to be addressed.

The ELMCIP project asked many subtle questions and set itself ambitious objectives across diverse activities and with a number of complementary objectives that range beyond the focus of this text. The expected outcomes of this particular aspect of the project did not manifest as a set of clear answers, as the questions posed are elusive, but rather as a probable set of apprehensions taking

multiple forms. Some of these were more or less conventional research outcomes, such as texts and documentation, but also included artworks in various media, including digital art, electronic texts, new media performance, and sound works. Whilst the members of the research team were involved in undertaking research and producing such outcomes, we also engaged creative communities through commissioning a number of new artworks, across media and disciplines, and by involving members in a series of workshops and seminars during the period of the project.

Outcomes were presented at the final ELMCIP international conference, held in Edinburgh (Nov. 1-3 2012). Research team members, invited presenters and peer reviewed submissions were presented, including the outcomes of the case studies undertaken by the ELMCIP research project detailed in this text. The conference was complemented by an exhibition and performance program of peer reviewed commissioned artworks with a publication incorporating the research outcomes, the conference proceedings, documentation of the artworks included in the exhibition and performance program and an interactive DVD of commissioned digital arts and electronic literature artworks. The intention was that these multifaceted outcomes would allow a non-instrumentalist appreciation of creative practice in networked communities to emerge and a detailed and thorough record of activity in such communities, especially in the field of electronic literature and the digital arts, to be established.

AMATEURS ONLINE: CREATIVITY IN A COMMUNITY

BY YRA VAN DIJK

INTRODUCTION

With the large possibilities of online communication and participation, the character of art communities and institutions is going through fundamental changes. The World Wide Web, and the availability of mobile screens and interactive software, has altered authorship, processes of distribution, evaluation, and canonization. In the field of literature, for example, we seem to be moving from a closed system of institutional hierarchies to a more participatory mode, in which a larger part of the public has influence on the production, evaluation, and canonization of texts (Benkler 2006 and Verboord 2011).

Online communities are coming into existence in which work, reviews or information on texts are exchanged. Apart from a few isolated publications (Boot et al. 2012), we do not, as of yet, have much insight into the character and function of such online amateur literary communities. While there is a wealth of research material on large social networking websites like Facebook, the function of small, creative communities on the Internet largely remains to be analyzed; doing so would provide valuable insights into the emergence of social structure on the Internet.

How does an online amateur literary community form and interact? One expects similarities with other online communities, such as music scenes (Nieckarz 2005 and Williams 2006), as we will indeed see later on. For the community of digital writers, one might additionally expect continuities with the way that communities of print authors have been constituted, with specific social, ethical and esthetical functions (Summers and Pebworth 2000 and van Rees and Dorleijn 2006). Are similar functions performed by a community that centers on digital literature?

Contrary to digitized literature, digital literature is "born" digital. The official definition is formulated by the Electronic Literature Organization as "work with an important literary aspect that takes advantage of the capabilities and con-

text provided by the stand-alone or networked computer" (cited by Hayles 2008, 2). This article addresses a community of authors of a specific genre within the heterogeneous field of digital literature: interactive fiction (IF).

Interactive fiction is a form of branched narrative in which the reader is addressed as a character in the story and provides input, which determines the route taken through the narrative. The works are written like an interactive riddle, which the reader can solve by performing certain tasks. This lack of distance between the reader and the protagonist (or: "the player-character") is one of the defining characteristics of IF. Thus, its works have some characteristics of a game and some of a print text, and they are defined by the community itself as "computer-based text adventures." These games involve the player entering textual commands in response to the game's output. In turn, this output is influenced by the player's input."

For three reasons, the IF-community serves as an exemplary case by which to gain insight into the creativity of digital communities. First, this community is centered around a single and very specific genre with specific mechanics that create a need for mutual support on a technical and a literary level. Second, since the genre has a long history, with periods of commercial success, the community explicitly discusses issues of professional versus amateur art and of the role of the authors. These two reasons have led to a third one: We have in IF a consistent and mutually dependent community with a very strong tradition of self-description, self-fashioning and self-archiving. Such self-descriptions provide an evaluation of the function of the discussion list by the members themselves. In archiving different strata of the discussion, the contributors have mapped some of the discourse space. This implicit self-presentation is combined with explicit self-description in some of the discussion strands. Both this self-reflexivity and the consistency and long duration of the discussion list make *rec.arts.int-fiction* a complete case from which conclusions may be drawn about the function, the structure and the product of online amateur artistic communities. With its online discussion of long duration, the IF-community provides more than only sociability for the authors. In addition to that, it creates an audience, an archive and an institutional, poetical and archival embedding for their work.

After sketching the interdisciplinary theoretical framework, which draws on sociology, on sociology of art and on literary theory, a survey is then made of the way that author communities function, both in print ("offline") and online.

After the discussion of the data and the methods used in this study, finally, a description and analysis of the exchanges in the community in question is presented. The corpus consists of the online exchanges on the discussion list *rec.arts.int-fiction* between 1993 and the present.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present analysis of a digital community is based on a multi-disciplinary theoretical approach. It is not a strictly sociological nor a strictly literary study because one has to operate halfway between both if the primary question is about how, in sociological terms, this online literary community (or rather "network") functions. What are the continuities and discontinuities with other online communities, on the one hand, and with print author communities, on the other hand, is the sociological question. The evaluation of the conceptions, works, ideas or exchanges that are produced, however, belongs to the field of literary studies.

This is why the textual data—the archive of online exchanges between members of the network—will also be analyzed at the level of self-defining and meta-statements. In this manner, I hope to be able to describe and explain both the general nature of the network, such as which stance it takes in literary culture.

What constitutes a community and how is it to be assessed? As Latour (2005, 5) points out more generally, if one defines the collective of authors beforehand as a community, one takes as a starting point the fact that actually needs to be researched. Therefore, I will mostly speak, henceforth, not of "community" but of a "network." The difference between the two is, firstly, that one avoids preliminarily deciding what constitutes a group, and instead, allows the group to define itself as such: "we follow the actor's own ways and begin our travels by the traces left behind by their activity of forming and dismantling groups" (Latour 2005, 29). His actor-network theory emphasizes the dynamic character of a network; it is more a process than a product: "groupings have constantly to be made, or remade, and during this creation or recreation the group-makers leave behind many traces that can be used as data by the informer" (Latour 2005, 34–35). With the use of the term "network" and the dynamic character of it, my business with Latour ends. Since the research question does not concern the connections that make up the network, but rather the function of the group and its view of itself, the present analysis of this specific network is in the vein of ethnography, or rather "observation ethnography:" "an unobtrusive research role in which I

conducted content analysis of forum threads without focused interaction with participants" (Williams 2006, 180). More specifically, one could refer to "cyber-ethnography." Such cyber-ethnography does not start with a preconceived idea of what constitutes a community either, but with what the participants themselves see as their group, thereby avoiding the risk of enforcing a framework on a virtual community. Note that the community is not considered to be merely "virtual" in cyber-ethnography, but its members are found to be more fragmented and to show less obligation to loyalty, with members having an "unconditional" relationship with the community: collective ideals are no longer a condition for a virtual community, and there is no fixed communal identity. Instead, "the spirit of community" itself is crucial (Ward 1999, 98). The question, then, is whether this also holds true for an online community of authors.

Additionally, the sociology of art allows for an analysis of the continuities and discontinuities such a community shares with existing artistic fields. We should thus consider the function of an amateur community in the perspective of the Western "declassification" in art (DiMaggio 1987). DiMaggio has described urban elites who worked to construct a widely known boundary between "high culture" (i.e., art) and "popular culture" (i.e., entertainment) in the late 1800s and early 1900s, thereby upholding the superiority of art over entertainment (Dimaggio 1987, 446). Because urban elites have since become less cohesive and less committed to that boundary, and as the economic profits in art are low, this broad classification has lost its function. Indeed, Janssen et al. (2011) have offered an extensive analysis of newspaper coverage of art between 1955 and 2005, and they see a growth in attention given to popular culture in the U.S. and in France—growth that has come at the expense of high culture (Janssen et al. 2011, 159). The Internet has further contributed to such a declassification of art (Schmutz 2009 and Verboord 2011).

The specific community of digital authors considered here constructs, not only their community, but also a new literary genre that borrows from popular culture. DiMaggio has argued that new artistic genres are partly based on "social relations among producers" (DiMaggio 1987, 441). Genres therefore are socially constructed. Given this, DiMaggio studies the "processes by which tastes are produced as part of the sense-making and boundary-defining activities of social groups" (DiMaggio 1987, 441). This model, in which a network develops and constructs the outlines of a genre, will be applied to the digital network of

IF-writers, as manifested in their online discussion list. Creativity and production will be understood to work in different ways here: First, the outlines of a genre are created, as are specific works. Connections that establish the network itself are based on a shared interest in the writing of interactive fiction (IF): "Taste then, is a form of ritual identification and a means of constructing social relations…" (DiMaggio 1987, 443).

AUTHOR COMMUNITIES OFFLINE AND ONLINE

Communities and networks of literary artists form in specific ways. In the twentieth century, centered around geographical or institutional nodes (e.g., a poetic society, a journal, a college), authors tried to establish common conceptions of literature: "a set of mostly normative ideas and arguments on the nature and function of literature, on literary techniques and their alleged effects on readers" (van Rees and Dorleijn 2001, 340).

Common ground for author networks, clustered around institutions, was found in rebellion against prevailing poetics, for example, and in the collective development of new forms and new poetic notions. Expressed either in the literary texts or in "paratexts"—such as introductions, essays or letters—new ideas on the form and the function of literature were made to converge, giving rise to the birth of a literary movement. Authors joined forces to defend these new ideas and create a readership for them. Given this, studies on authorship and group constitution have tended to focus on "strategic routes that serve to claim and legitimize a position in the literary (or in the scholarly) field" (Dorleijn et al. 2010).

Since such emphasis on transformations, rather than on continuity, is common in the history and sociology of literature, less material can be found on communities that do not make a claim for the new. As Craig and Dubois (2010) point out: poets have also sought connection to existing orders rather than always changing them. Craig and Dubois (2010, 443) describe how poetry has its own infrastructure and how it requires support from the state, the academy and publishers, since the market for poetry is not large. These sub-networks of poetry are compared to the e-lit community by Scott Rettberg (2009), since both are "other-than-mass-market." In terms of the cultural sociology of Bourdieu, this is the field in which producers produce for each other: the autonomous field. The difference is, of course, that poetry has "high" symbolic capital (e.g., prestige,

honor), as Bourdieu (1993, 47) would call it, and that digital literature still has to obtain a status for itself in the literary field.

Since most actors in the IF-network seem not very interested in "symbolic capital," as the analysis will demonstrate, we could pursue another comparison that places more emphasis on the communal function of the network: the community of digital authors seems to share characteristics with literary circles of print authors of the past. Definitions of such circles are "frustratingly vague or suspiciously flexible and shifting," as Summers and Pebworth (2000, 2) remark in a study on Renaissance literary communities in England. In their view, however, a literary circle in that era was "one of the essential material conditions of the production of literature" and a "coterie whose members are linked by social, political, philosophical or esthetic interests or values, or who vie for the interest and attention of a particular patron, or who are drawn together by bonds of friendship, family, religion or location" (Summers and Pebworth 2000, 1). In the same volume, Achsah Guibbory adds: "Most crucial is the existence of a shared ethos—social, political or religious values and concerns that members of a circle have in common and that help define the community" (Guibbory 2000, 221).

Both the size and character of such circles have been transformed and developed in different eras and contexts, although historical transformations are hard to discern from changes in the constructions made by literary historians. As Judith Herz points out, literary circles may be "an artifact of literary history, constructed after the fact to frame otherwise heterogeneous materials" (Herz 2000, 12).

Less complex to define and describe, however, is another form of literary community, which started to develop in the eighteenth century: the poetic societies as they thrived in Holland and Germany. Unlike the aforementioned Renaissance literary circles, or the French "salons," these societies were not organized around a single person or a small geographically or socially coherent group, and they were not specifically aimed at courtliness or patronage (Goodman 1989). The poetic societies of the second half of the eighteenth century were larger, with an average of 100–200 members, democratically structured and explicitly humanist and often nationalist in their goals, based on the idea that the process of poetic creation could best be stimulated in the context of a community. The prevailing "ethos" was that rhetorical excellence could be a means of civilization and education, and writing competitions were organized around a theme. This came

to an end around 1800, when emphasis shifted from creation to declamation of works in the nineteenth century (Kloek and Mijnhardt 2004, 105, 431-435). The professionalization of authorship and the growing distinction between high and low art may have been cause of the demise of the societies. What was produced in the eighteenth-century societies was more than only creative works and their circulation: it was a creation of an internal institutional and critical framework.

Which continuities are to be seen between these literary circles and societies, on the one hand, and the network of IF-authors, on the other hand? Since editors, bookstores and professional critics are largely absent in this field, the Internet community of IF-authors seems to have taken over the functions that, in print literature, have been performed by institutions like academic criticism, literary venues, circles and societies, editors, journals, bookstores or universities. Digital authors have to criticize, judge, and sell their own work, in the absence of people to do so for them (Baetens and Van Looy 2008 and Rettberg 2009). Apart from the social function of such networks, and their emphasis on the production of works, an important function thus appears to be the production of a critical and institutional framework within the community. As in the eighteenth-century literary societies, emphasis is on sociability itself and furthermore on technique and rhetorical craft, on the formation of an institution in its own right, and on distributing the work among the actors of the network. Many differences are to be found as well: the absence of face-to-face contact and of underlying humanist or nationalist ideals, as well as the fact that the new networks have to find a place for themselves within a literary world that is now organized around the distinctions between amateur and professional and between "popular" and "high art."

How do the actors in the online community react to these distinctions? Do they show a shared interest in claiming a place in the cultural field for the new genre, a shared interest in the professionalization of its authors? Or, rather, do they seek connection to existing orders?

The sociology of literature supposes that new "players" in the field tend to defend a new position for their work, starting at the periphery. For example, Serge Bouchardon (2010) looks at French online digital author communities and confirms that part of their efforts go toward defining such a new position: "The actors of é-critures have been attempting to categorize the works in order to structure and delimit the field of digital literature. The traditionally defining features of the genres under construction seem to be discarded in favor of new

features by the authors themselves, hereby challenging the very notion of literary genre" (Bouchardon 2010, 22).

Rather than finding common ground in poetics, however, Bouchardon (2010) finds in these communities a collective emphasis on format: the online discussion was on semiotics rather than semantics (e.g., on the "language" of the work rather than on the meaning of it) and on technical formats rather than on formal features. A number of creative forces occurred on the discussion list: "To sum up, the original idea of a work can be born on the list, the exchanges can inspire its author as for the contents, the comments can entail an evolution of the work. Finally, the explanations of the author's approach on the list can then offer a paratext for the work" (Bouchardon 2010, 20). The question is whether in the IF discussion list, too, the chosen software technology has become a central factor in the exchanges and the formation of this digital network. The role of the institutional or poetical center seems to have made way for a software and genre-based center: discussion lists tend to be distinguished by questions of format rather than by questions of esthetics.

In digital literature, the writing technology is a crucial part of the strategy of signification: the ways in which a work can carry meaning are determined by the choice of software and hardware. Poetics in digital media thus may be found in its "conceptualization and facilitation" (Memmott 2011, 65). Since what distinguishes the IF-community from other digital literature communities—like, again, é-critures, described as a "laboratory of forms" (Bouchardon 2010, 21)—is the concentration around a single genre, a large part of the exchanges, for example, is expected to focus on coding issues and on the exchange of code in the code library, where pieces of code concerning specific, complex game-elements are passed on. As is also to be expected, emphasis here is less on originality than is the case in print literature. Authorship and agency are distributed differently in a digital environment, as Barrett Watten (2006, 366) points out: "Currently, we may discern a movement away from poetics in the single-authored mode (with exceptions) toward a return to a multi-authored, metadiscursive, dialogic practice particularly in online zines and blogs." Amateur writing on the Internet, as of yet, has not been the object of much academic attention—apart from the pedagogical sphere, in which attention have been given, for example, to fan fiction communities (Black 2008). Boot (2011) is an exception with his quantitative analysis of an online amateur story-writing community, focusing on issues of reputation and

evaluation within the community. Indeed, the Internet allows for collaboration in the sense of mutual criticism and praise, as we will see later, in "Toward a Genre."

In the case of IF, the focus on a single genre also adds a historical dimension to the discussion. The IF-community has a long history, going back to the days of the first text adventure games, the first of which was exploited by Will Crowther in 1975 and elaborated by Don Woods. Later on, the text games were even exploited commercially, an episode which still influences the community and the aspirations of some authors toward professionalization and canonization.

Works are written, read and evaluated by the actors of the network, and yearly awards are given to the best works in different categories, resulting in a "canon" of works of interactive fiction (see below). One of the traditional functions of sub-networks in the print literary field was exactly this: to find a way to a specific audience, and even to create and educate such an audience. In print, this obviously implied creating a market for the work in question. This does not seem to be the primary function in e-literature communities, however, since after Infocom, and apart from a single editor like Eastgate for hypertext fiction (non-linear, hyperlinked narrative without text input by the reader), no attempts have been made at creating a market. Questions of institutionalization could be expected to be addressed, since formerly "genres" were associated with institutional embedding. However, the new genre of IF has no such embedding, and its authors are not even clear as to whether these works are games or texts, since they operate between the two. This idea is confirmed by looking at the existing scholarly discussion on IF, beginning with print books. These works are produced by members of the community, as Busse and Hellekson (2006, 18–19) note is the case for scholarly work on fan fiction. These studies give us insight into how the genre of IF and its status are perceived within the community, and they reflect how the community presents itself—partly to the outside world, partly to itself.

Nick Montfort (2003) commences the first history of interactive fiction, *Twisty Little Passages*, with an elaborate discussion on the literary status of the genre. Just like many publications on digital literature, Montfort argues why it is more than a "triviality," as many people still seem to think (Montfort 2003, 9). He gives three arguments for the literariness of the genre of IF: Firstly, due to the puzzle-character of IF, the narrative is revealed gradually. Secondly, there is also the sense of exploring a new world or space. Finally, it belongs to a long-standing tradition of literary riddles (Montfort 2003, 3–4). Thus, the question of literari-

ness, and hence of cultural capital, is put early in the book. By referring to Barthes, Baudrillard and Greek drama, Montfort (2003) firmly places IF among highbrow literary discourse. Graham Nelson does something similar when he opens *The Craft of Adventure* with a literary quote from the work of Jean de la Bruyere (Nelson 2001). It is telling, though, that Nelson's other mottos and quotes are derived from players, children, and practitioners: here, we see the explicit absence of cultural hierarchies. More than in some other digital literary genres, the opposition between highbrow literature, on the one hand, and entertainment culture, on the other, seems to be deconstructed in Nelson's study. As for the professionalization of the genre, the same distinction occurs between Montfort's and Nelson's studies: the former slightly downplays the share of "amateur" contribution to the genre, and the online community of IF-authors is not much of a quoted "source" for Monfort. In contrast, Nelson quotes the discussion list regularly in his study on IF, for example, when he sketches the history of the genre (Nelson 2001, 365).

The above survey of theory and of the context of both print and online communities leads to three hypotheses about the network of digital authors considered in the article. First, the network is expected to contribute to the definition of the genre and its place in the cultural field. Second, as in other online networks, the participants themselves are expected to "take the lead role in establishing the reality, status and principles of [their group]" (Biggs and Travlou 2010, 11) and membership in the group is unconditional. Third, one expects a blending of roles in this network: practitioners, scholars and consumers of digital literature tend to be the same persons performing different roles, and authorship is more distributed. Indeed, the network of IF-authors seems to take over some of the functions that were traditionally divided across different institutions—functions like distribution and evaluation.

DATA AND METHODS

There are quite a number of platforms on which parts of the IF-community interact. Originally (since the beginning of the 1990s), and until recently, digital exchanges between authors of IF were posted to two newsgroups: *rec.games.int-fiction* and *rec.arts.int-fiction*: the first for players and the second for authors, although the division between these two roles is not very static, as we will see below. This newsgroup platform is where most discussion took place, and this is where the data will be obtained for the present study. Compared to the other

platforms, newsgroups may be searched easily with the search tool provided by Google, with the community interacting on them being larger and the interactions, for the most part, being specifically about interactive fiction.

Consider the other platforms. On the MUD, for example, the IF-community is smaller and more of an "in-crowd."[9] A MUD is a multi-player digital environment; originally created for online collaborative gaming, players can interact which each other's characters in the virtual world of the MUD, but sometimes (as in this case) they can use the environment to chat and organize themselves. Actors that communicate on the MUD organize the yearly elections for the XYZZY Awards, which attract much attention within the community.[10] This platform has a different and broader social function than the newsgroups, and discussions can be on any topic: "Basically, regulars from the IF newsgroups sit around talking about things ranging from IF-writing to hints on games to general computer stuff to music to monkeys, alpacas, and corn. It's fun."[11]

Apart from the MUD, there are many private blogs with reviews, under http://planet-if.com/. A new central location is the "IFDB," where players review works and practitioners publish them: "IFDB is a Wiki-style community project: members can add new game listings, write reviews, exchange game recommendations, and more."[12] In addition to this, there are a number of smaller websites like Brass Lantern and SPAG, which are also places for reviews.[13] Moreover, there are a few yearly events: the IF Competition, organized for sixteen years now, and smaller competitions.[14] And, of course, the XYZZY Awards, where players vote for works in different categories. For younger generations, blogs and forums are more obvious media of exchange; therefore, the importance of the newsgroups has diminished over the last few years—from an average of 1100 posts a month in its peak years to an average of eighty-eight posts a month in 2011.[15] Another new development in digital communities is the tendency to leave the virtual do-

9 http://ifmud.port4000.com/.

10 http://xyzzyawards.org/.

11 This is from the FAQ contained on rec.arts.int-fiction.

12 See http://ifdb.tads.org.

13 http://www.brasslantern.org/, and http://www.sparkynet.com/spag/.

14 http://www.ifcomp.org/.

15 See http://www.intfiction.org/forum/index.php, and http://groups.google.com/group/rec.arts.int-fiction/about.

main and meet up in person; one group of IF-authors meets every first Saturday of the month in Berkeley, for example.[16] The augmentation of infrastructure has fragmented and altered the network.

Not a place for discussion, but for storage, is the IF Archive, as well as "Baf's Guide to the IF Archive."[17] This is the location where all the practitioners put their works and games, "the main distribution channel."[18]

As said previously, this article focuses on just one such platform, the one with the longest duration and the strongest focus on creating IF, the original newsgroup for practitioners (i.e. *rec.arts.int-fiction*). This focus is partly motivated by practical reasons (the necessity to limit the network) and partly by the fact that it is among practitioners rather than among players (*rec.games.int-fiction*) that we might expect to find more information on the network itself, as well as on genre construction, distribution, evaluation or esthetics of IF.

The discussion list *rec.arts.int-fiction*, now continuing as a Google group, started out in 1989 as a newsgroup.[19] In the IF-archive, discussion strands from this list are archived, starting in 1993 and running through October 2002, from which zip files may be downloaded containing messages posted on a single topic during a month.[20] A second archive of the discussion list is the "IF-wiki," an online domain in which members of the IF-network contribute to the history and archive of their network. On this IF-wiki, discussion strands are structured along what the actors call "interesting" discussion strands from 1989 to the present.[21] This all reveals that there are three possible sources for exchanges on this platform: one archive is chronologically ordered until 2002; the next, the wiki, is thematically ordered and selected until the present; and the third is the online Google discussion list.

The latter two sources will be mined in this article. Since the interest here lies not with individual relationships within the community but with the operations within the network and with the content of the creative process performed

16 This resulted from an initiative of Dan Fabulich on June 29th, 2011: http://groups.google.com/group/rec.arts.int-fiction/browse_thread/thread/2b0375a511263227#.

17 http://www.ifarchive.org/, http://www.wurb.com/if/

18 Victor Gijsbers stated this in personal communication.

19 https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/rec.arts.int-fiction.

20 See http://www.ifarchive.org/indexes/if-archiveXrec.arts.int-fiction.html.

21 See http://www.ifwiki.org/index.php/Past_raif_topics.

within it, individual cases will not be analyzed. Instead, this article focuses on discussion strands and the structure in which these strands are archived and organized. The IF-wiki archives the discussions thematically, which allows for insight into the self-presentations of the network. On the wiki, we find twenty-three subdirectories, which range from a broad theme like "art" to a more specific one like "mapping tools." The main topics are "development, game mechanics, writing, player and PC, IF theory, NPC's and artificial intelligence, community and miscellaneous."[22] Additional data are the FAQs that provide useful insight into which social norms the community emphasizes most. These FAQs are where the "socialization process" of new members takes place (Karpovich 2006 and Nieckarz 2005).

Apart from describing these structures and substructures of the discussion in the next section, the exchanges on the Google group will be searched too, with the search tool offered by Google. It allows for a detailed search for specific topics.

The selection of discussion strands and topics relevant for the issues at stake are based on the following analytical questions. To begin with, three hypotheses were formulated in the previous section: we expect that participants establish the status and structure of their group; that they contribute to the definition of the genre and its place in the cultural field; and that members can take on a number of different roles from the cultural field, which gives the network a partly institutional function.

Sociological are the questions that refer to the self-reflexive activity on the list: how does the network establish and define itself (if at all)? What is the structure of its own archive on the IF-wiki? Is there a moderator for the discussions, are there rules and criteria for membership, do people introduce themselves, and how? Do they create online identities or use "real" ones? These questions are not answered by mining discussion-strands, but with a qualitative analysis of the FAQ and of the structure of the discussion list.

On the level of, specifically, cultural and literary sociology, the questions are as follows: What shared conceptions do the actors have of IF? What function and what status do they see for their work in the cultural field, in relation to other art forms and genres (Keywords: function, critics, authorship, reputation, evalua-

22 See http://www.ifwiki.org/index.php/Past_raif_topics.

tion, reviews, quality, audience, art, high brow, popular, literature, music money, autonomy, award, games, adventure)? Do the actors of the network discuss the function of their work, be it mimetic, ethical, esthetical, educational, entertainment (Keywords: ethics, aesthetics, aesthetical, entertainment, fun, education, learning, play, writing, reading, hobby, commercial)?

On the level of literary studies, the questions are as such: Is the genre "created" in formal or technical exchanges? This implies using search terms that refer to the interpretation of works, to the history of the genre, to mutual influences, and to techniques and form and content of IF, specifically (Keywords: influence, history, example, innovation, new, story, genre, narrative, interpretation, maze, science-fiction, immersion, player). What preferences do practitioners have for generic, narrative and thematic choices, and why? What is the critical idiom used (Keywords: game, structure, narrative, tools, puzzle, chance, mimesis, fantasy)?

Researching an online network generally implies working with large data. The availability of large quantities of verbal exchanges is no exception in research addressing online communities (Howard 2002). It is considered a problem by some (Beaulieu 2004, 154) and a tremendous possibility by others (Boot 2011). The amount of exchanges available is not a problem in this case, since we can search the database of the newsgroup with the tool provided by Google. The analytical questions thus provide a frame of selection for which messages will be analyzed qualitatively.

The keywords listed above provided a selection of both messages and of entire discussion strands. The selection was read through randomly and used to formulate answers to the analytical questions (see Analysis).[23] As mentioned above, for questions concerning reflection on the community itself and the self-governing structure of the community, the FAQ-document of the discussion list was analyzed, and for issues concerning hierarchy and the structuring of topics, the way strands were organized on the IF-wiki was analyzed.

23 The selection of the messages was done partly at CRCA, University of California, San Diego, with the assistance of Jeremy Douglass, PhD, and partly at the University of Amsterdam, with Paul van Vliet, MA.

ANALYSIS

STRUCTURE AND MEMBERSHIP OF THE COMMUNITY

What springs to the eye most is the self-organization and self-archiving of the exchanges. As mentioned before, on a special wiki "a collection of interesting discussions" is presented.[24] The quality and accessibility of the archives points already to the status given to the exchanges within the community. Exchanges are not just like phatic speech acts: their function is not only to communicate that actors are communicating, but their content is obviously considered by the community itself to be of enough value to be kept accessible.

If we look at the topics on the wiki, it turns out that an emphasis lies on technical questions of programming and writing. On another level, we find an emphasis on theory, self-reflection and analysis of their own community: aspects that, in print communities, we would see performed by critics, newspapers and other institutions. This gives the IF-community an aspect of high self-sufficiency and self-reflexivity.

An auto-description of the community and the rec.arts list is also to be found in the FAQ as:[25]

> In this newsgroup, we discuss the technical and artistic aspects of interactive fiction, as well as the actual processes of and tools for writing it. While we do mention specific IF games, it is typically in the context of comparing and contrasting their structure or artistic merit—with emphasis on the development of IF as a literary genre and/or a form of computer-based art/entertainment.

The explicit intention of the community, thus, is to focus on the creativity of the community as the formation and definition of a genre. This implies that discussions within the newsgroup have to be well organized and limited to specific subjects, as the text of the FAQ shows. Newcomers to the list are assisted with this elaborate FAQ, a reader in six parts, but are simultaneously instructed as to the "rules" of the list itself, which are stricter than one might expect in the free zone of the Internet. Other evaluations of net-culture have found a similar

24 See http://www.ifwiki.org/index.php/Past_raif_topics.

25 http://plover.net/~textfire/raiffaq/FAQ.htm.

presence of norms and "netiquette" in online communities (Nieckarz 2005, 413; Williams 2006, 180).

Here, one learns the do's and don'ts of the messages: "do not post very long or irrelevant pieces of code" or "when you post a dissenting view remember to attack the idea, not the person;" only a handful of "flame wars" a year occurs, according to the FAQ, "which is quite good for a newsgroup." Apart from the basic rules of a civilized debate, there are rules that are specific and the condition for a network to come into existence: the obligation to communicate:

> Remember, *rec.arts.int-fiction* is a discussion group, and will only function if people contribute to it. So, while you ought to just read for a week or two to get a taste of the flavor of the group before spicing things up with your first post, don't lurk too long. We do want to hear from you…

We may conclude that this is a strong self-structuring network. Abusers of the group are swiftly corrected by the other actors—for example, if they use the list for self-promotion or for gossiping about others on the list ("do not ad hom"). The structuring and archiving of the network is evident from the existence of such a clear and well-written list of "rules." The text of this "FAQ" even begins with meta-FAQ, in which all the previous authors of it are acknowledged and thanked. Contrary to what new media scholars tend to believe, the question of individual authorship seems not to be unimportant in digital creativity (van Dijk 2012). This is confirmed by the fact that many, but not all, contributors to the list use their actual names and actual mail-addresses. A notable exception is one of the leading IF-authors, who operates under the pseudonym of "Emily Short." And some actors explicitly rely on the anonymity of a digital community:

> Also, let's keep in mind that none of you actually know me. All (most) of the discourse below is fascinating, but it seems you all are assuming that I am an upstanding citizen. I am not. I break the law on a daily basis, and with far more serious crimes than software piracy (oblio42, 3-1-2001).

But generally, actors do not operate anonymously, contrary to most amateur authors on "print-writing" communities online, and they act surprisingly similar as to how one would in "real" social situations.[26] That is, questions are answered, identities are revealed, and rules of conduct respected. David Keller writes, for

26 See http://www.amateurwriting.net/, http://writersdiscussion.co.nr and www.OnParables.com. Now that writing is exchanged more on Facebook, anonymity is less of an issue.

example, on April 1, 2002: "Proper reply in a day or so, it's 2:40 a.m. local time and I've got to get some sleep. Hope it doesn't seem like I've been ignoring anyone here or elsewhere. I've been offline for days." This confirms what *Collaborative Futures* states on collaboration: that "rules for participation, established guidelines for attribution, organizational structure and leadership, and clear goals are necessary for participation"(Hyde et. al 2010, 4)

The same goes for membership in the newsgroup, which may be approached and described as a form of collaboration. Leadership, for example, is not organized explicitly, but a hierarchy is based partly on the frequency of posts. Google newsgroups provides data on which member have contributed most (e.g., 4933 messages over the years). Interestingly, the authors of some renown are the most active contributors to the list, on which Andrew Plotkin and Emily Short were the top two names at the time of writing this article, both "professional" IF-authors in the sense that they sell their work or they strive toward selling. Recently, Andrew Plotkin and Michael Berlyn have started to release their games on the iPhone.[27] The play on mobile devices might be altering the status of some authors and of the genre. If we stick to the comparison with the field of poetry, even the most renowned writer of IF is not a "well-established" author, in the sense that his or her fame does not extend beyond the field (Craig and Dubois 2010, 445).

Star IF-author Emily Short—the author of, for example, *Galatea* (2000)—is well known in the community for the quality of her work and for her generosity with software that she developed and which she makes freely available to the community.[28] Although authorship is not as "distributed" as one might expect in the new media age, there is a generous exchange of free code on the list (although it is generally posted on the archive, not on the newsgroup). This "gift economy" is another parallel to the field of poetry (Craig and Dubois 2010, 449) and to other online communities (Nieckarz 2005, 415). In the "code library" we find such pieces of giftware: one of the tangible products of the community. The effect is that these pieces of code function as "a vector for poetic effects" (Douglass 2008), when new games all use the same code for similar game situations.

It becomes clear why the discussion list should be approached as a collaborative network. Of course, as Becker points out on the very first page of his

27 See https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/reconstructing-remy-interactive/id656748086?mt=8.

28 See http://nickm.com/if/emshort/galatea.html.

Art Worlds, "all artistic work…involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number of people" (Becker 1982, 1). The point made here is that the traces of that joint effort, the discussions, are archived and have become part of what is produced. The hierarchy between text and paratext, and between "core activities of art" and peripheral and functional "matters of craft" (Becker 1982, 16), has changed, and levels have blended. We have seen artist-craftsmen develop a "minor art world" before and a deconstruction of the criteria of function and beauty too (Becker 1982, 278–279). In these digital artistic communities, however, the craft criterion of skill is combined with characteristics of collaborative works: an emphasis on processes of interaction and play rather than on products and audiences. But where most artistic collaborations of the twentieth century had some political ambitions (Green 2001), this is not at the basis of this collaboration.

TOWARD A GENRE

In the IF-network, the actors reflect on the necessity to create and enlarge their audience and to "raise the profile" of IF.[29] "How to reach a wider audience" is the title of a thread in 2006. In a similar vein, authors discuss the possibility and the desirability to make commercial IF in 2003: "why would we want commercial IF? (long and preachy)."[30] The question already emphasizes the lack of consensus within the network on this question: arguments for and against are given.

This implies that the actors do not agree on their own cultural status of either "amateurs" or "professionals"—which is clearly an important question in the field because it is the source of numerous discussion threads that deal with criticism, commerciality, and audience. Some of the actors call IF their "hobby," others strive for a higher state of professionalization, if only to make IF less of a marginal genre. The same goes for the organizations of IF-awards. Contrary to what has been said (Gervais 2007), the lack of institutional force does not automatically lead to "centrifugal" cultural relations, in which the pull of a center is replaced with a dispersion of relations with the outside. Although Internet communities allow, indeed, for a "decentralizing of cultural exchanges—short-circuiting a number of social and cultural institutions" (Gervais 2007, 191), the IF-commu-

29 See http://groups.google.com/group/rec.arts.int-fiction/browse_frm/thread/bc9ad770360f196e.

30 See http://groups.google.com/group/rec.arts.int-fiction/browse_thread/thread/17504d4a2f01d0f4/9e9bf082463f9f2b?lnk=gst&q=commercial+IF#9e9bf082463f9f2b.

nity demonstrates that, within a cultural periphery, new centers, traditions and canons are quickly established. The same is found by Baetens and Van Looy with respect to the genre of e-poetry. It has rapidly developed a closed canon, with a relatively small number of gatekeepers: "…in the age of globalization, it seems that the mechanisms of power, i.e., of selection, promotion, and exclusion, are strengthened rather than weakened" (Baetens and Van Looy 2008).

This canonizing and historical force of the network is significant and surprising, and it seems to be modeled on literary history and art history. A term like "influence," for example, is borrowed from artistic discourse. Will Crowther, the creator of the first adventure game has a legendary status on the list, as do successful authors like Emily Short. Apart from these authors whose reputation is established in the field, it looks like fame in this field (similar to the gaming culture) is more for the works than for the authors. Names of works that are set as an example pop up in many messages—names of authors much less, often not even known or remembered. One contributor to the list, for example, speaks of "the guy who did Palm Frot" (April 25, 2002). The award culture is another way of foregrounding works. Although the network is not hierarchically organized, the system of evaluation and canonization is strong and well established.

Criteria for the evaluation and canonization of work are discussed explicitly by the members of the community. They are authors, but critics, jurors and audience too. The actors in the community are well aware of their double roles: "Are we playing or programming? (Or reading or writing?)," one IF practitioner asks.[31] And in a discussion on the quality of IF, Jim Aikin assures a member of the list that he is allowed to criticize others, even when he has not released a game: "Any intelligent reader is qualified to be a critic" (May 3, 2003). In the same message, Aikin confirms that amateurs write virtually all IF. These discussion strands point toward a high level of self-reflection and analysis of the own community: aspects that, in communities of "print authors," we would see performed by critics, newspapers and other institutions. Thus, the network of IF-authors has a high state of self-sufficiency and self-reflexivity.

31 See http://groups.google.com/group/rec.arts.int-fiction/browse_frm/thread/da501efb49b567e2.

THE LITERARY

On the level of the literary, we looked for terms pointing to formal and poetical exchanges: any talk on how IF is made or should be made, both in terms of form and content. Thus, we find discussions on software and code, but also on what a story should be like, what preferences practitioners have for generic, narrative and thematic aspects of the work, and why. First of all, within this debate, IF is considered a game more than a work of literary fiction. As we have seen above, there is a fixed set of conventions. The discourse is underpinned by conceptions of what Sorolla (2011, 1) called the three basic elements of games: "coordination, chance and problem solving." Concepts like "the maze" and "the puzzle" have a main role in the discussion on forms of IF.

As far as other cultural products mentioned as influences or examples, references are made to popular literary genres like science fiction, detective novels, or fantasy novels—with J.R.R. Tolkien's work as one of the canonical works that serves as an inspiration for IF-writers. Science fiction and fantasy movies are similar sources. In a strand called "suggested readings," some more literary recommendations are made: Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, Peter Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*, William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* series—not to forget Edgar Allen Poe's work.[32]

Reading is categorized in the IF-wiki under "miscellaneous" and, therefore, does not seem to be considered by the actors as having a primary role in the establishment of the discourse. The same is to be seen in Nelson's (2001) *The Craft of Adventure: Five Articles on the Design of Adventure Games*. Literary authors are named, not so much as an example to follow, but just as the inventors of stylistic frames from which to choose.

> The essential flavor that makes your game distinctive and yours is genre. And so the first decision to be made, when beginning a design, is the style of the game. Major or minor key, basically cheerful or nightmarish, or somewhere in between? Exploration, romance, mystery, historical reconstruction, adaptation of a book, film noir, horror? In the style of Terry Pratchett, Edgar Allen Poe, Thomas Hardy, Philip K. Dick? Icelandic, Greek, Chaucerian, Hopi Indian, Aztec, Australian myth (Nelson 2001, 12)?

32 See http://groups.google.com/group/rec.arts.int-fiction/browse_frm/thread/3d557c32ad7d63ee.

On an esthetic level, emphasis is not on literature: an early discussion strand on "interactive fiction as literature" has no more than twelve messages.[33]

If there is explicit discussion, it focuses on what defines IF and what defines the IF-experience as opposed to literature. "Immersion" is one of the main qualities that practitioners see. Charles Briscoe-Smith writes:

> In a film or book, the viewer or reader is not *really* involved with the story, since he isn't actually deciding on the course of action. In IF, on the other hand, the player usually does decide on what course the action will take, at least in the short term. I doubt that IF would be able to hold a player's attention if he was not making any important decisions—decisions that could affect the way the plot swings.

One of the arguments in the comparison to "static fiction," as IF-developers tend to call it, is that the involvement of the player in the plot is so high that it "offers an opportunity to make a statement that simply could not be made as effectively in static fiction," as Duncan Stevens (2011, 361) points out, and he mentions the "emotional impact" of works like Andrew Plotkin's *Shade* (2000). However, literary fiction is not the most important frame of reference. The genre of commercial computer games is more relevant to many IF-authors and to the technical and narrative questions they deal with in their exchanges. What IF shares with games is its function, which according to the authors, is primarily entertainment, be it on an intellectually high level.

If there were discussions on IF as "art" or "literature," they were mostly held in the 1990s. For example, a scholar of IF and member of the community, Espen Aarseth, writes:

> "Interactive fiction," or, as I prefer to call it, Adventure Games (AG), *is* an art, or we wouldn't be having this discussion. It exists as an ideal, around which we draw theories and criticisms, and most importantly, try to create the artifacts themselves. As soon as you have a recognizable class of humanly created objects, and the ability to say "this one is better than that one," you have an art (1993).

His comment ends with the words: "we need a craft of our own."

The turn the discussion has taken since then indicates that this is exactly what happened: IF has become a craft rather than an art. My hypothesis is that, in

33 See http://groups.google.com/group/rec.arts.int-fiction/browse_thread/thread/7346bd3834520622.

the beginning of the development of the genre, aspirations were for IF to become an "established" art form with an audience outside of the community. After a few years, acknowledgment came of the fact that it will remain a subgenre—somewhere in between writing and gaming, with its own community and institutions. Members that try to reopen this discussion are met with irritated reactions.

After the 1990s, reference to the artistic or literary value of IF made way for discussions on technical questions of narrative, plot and programming problems: "winnability" of the puzzle, for example. The question as to the "definition of IF" was not heard often on the discussion list after the end of the 1990s. It seems as if, by now, that the community had defined and framed itself and its genre so well, that these discussions had become less urgent. Thus, in later years, what the exchanges have produced is exactly that: a common understanding of what IF is and how it should be made. The conversation was vital in the conception of the genre. What is created and foregrounded is not only artistic production of a genre, but digital sociability itself, coming in addition to family and geographical social structures. The network, its exchanges and its archive are considered a product of collaboration.

CONCLUSION

One of the conclusions is that "genres" no longer need an institutional base in the offline world: they exist without bookstores, libraries or the press. Another is that these genres themselves have a centralizing function on the community. This means that, contrary to Ward's (1999) findings, there does exist a certain "communal identity." Formal and technical issues on the genre and its software (from "tricky objects" to "time limits" to "writing advice") by far outnumber theoretical or poetical issues such as "IF as art" (and significantly, the last discussion strand of that title was archived in 1999).

In many respects, the creativity of the community is to be found in the exchanges themselves (Leach 2012). Since the community (during the timeframe studied) had no other material or immaterial mode of existence, other than the exchanges, they are of crucial importance. What is created in the conversations is digital sociability itself, adding to family and geographical social structures, and collective knowledge of and experience with the genre in question. In the online exchanges, the actors not only review the works that are produced, but they also sketch the history of IF—another part of the tendency toward self-reflection and

genre constitution. The interactive fiction community is well documented and has highly structured archives of both texts and paratexts.

These well archived exchanges function as a reservoir of critical, technical and poetical knowledge and theory. This implies a form of collaboration with a "product," which is however not to be measured in any pragmatical or economical sense of the word, but rather as a form or resistance against that order (cf. Nieckarz 2005, 421). In addition to this reservoir of exchanges, the individual members of the community of IF-developers produce works of IF, which are—to state again—not to be measured in symbolic or economic value, but in pleasure and creativity on the part of the producer and the consumers.

A third conclusion to be drawn from the exchanges between IF-developers in a digital network is that the exchanges themselves perform institutional functions: criticism, canonization, the writing of the "history" of the genre and its influences, its distribution, etc. This community in the periphery of professional authors is thus indeed structured partly like the eighteenth-century societies of amateur writers or artists, which formed their own institutions (see Author Communities Offline and Online). As in those societies, emphasis is on craft and technique, as well as on production. A crucial difference, however, is that no common ethical ideals (humanism, nationalism) are at the basis of the online community.

Meizoz has argued, however, that this emphasis has also been a specific artistic pose since Rousseau's distinction between the "craftsman" and "man of letters." His "posture" has been copied by authors who want to express an "anti-establishment lifestyle:" "the modest craftsman who was independent from the powerful" (Meizoz 2010, 83). This stance of resistance may be why the issue of whether the works produced are literary does not attract much attention on the newsgroup. The rhetoric of the craftsman involves no obligation to acquire artistic value for the work; therefore, there is no need to "make it new" by breaking with literary ancestors or with the established institutions or poetics. My hypothesis is that this model of craftsmanship of the eighteenth-century artistic circle applies to more online artistic communities. This would imply that the offline field of production and evaluation of art is not so much defied by such communities, but evaded altogether, losing some of its power in the process. This creates the situation in which the traditional fields of art are bypassed, but in which intriguing and more democratic new forms of gatekeeping, anthologizing and canonizing are coming into being on the Internet.

COMMUNITIES/COMMONS: A SNAP LINE OF DIGITAL PRACTICE

BY LOSS PEQUEÑO GLAZIER

Communities/Commons: A Snap Line of Digital Practice presents a brief history of digital poetry, from the perspective of the Electronic Poetry Center (EPC), Buffalo, and the international E-Poetry Festivals of digital literature, art, and, performance (E-Poetry). The paper engages the discipline from various perspectives, considering its relation to historic contextualizing movements and institutional mechanisms. Determining a renewed vision of E-Poetry community, it is argued, are its exuberant origins: (1) the U.S. small press movements of the later Twentieth century; (2) the activities and philosophies of the Electronic Poetry Center; (3) its self-definition as more broadly-conceived than that of any specific category of digital literature; (4) the pre-existing literary ground of Black Mountain, Language Poetry, and related practices; (5) the vibrancy of the as-then-constituted Poetics Program at Buffalo, and; (6) a "symposium of the whole", the continued emerging importance of enthnopoetic localizations to an eventual realization of contemporary poetics. Finally, a call is made for the field being adaptable and more generous with its frames of reference. Such a breadth of understanding, it is concluded, contribute to E-Poetry's continuing vibrancy and to a wider vision of the possibilities for digital practice.

I am fascinated by the opening scene of Salvador Carrasco's epic film *La otra conquista/The Other Conquest* where the young scribe Topiltzin wakes up in the rain in the ruins of Tenochtitlán, fallen comrades around him, staggering to understand a total transformation of an historic paradigm. Such a change perhaps cannot be understood by historians, nor religiously, nor by any individual. In effect, our only option is, as was his, to write our way through it. The literal scribing of the material fragments onto the codex is the only way such an inversion of a dominant system can be processed. And, indeed–even given such a devastating historical collision, in Topiltzin's case–his practice of scribing the events created continuity with his past, as well as serving as a means to understanding his present.

It would be unfair to claim such historic proportions for the shift at hand. It is, after all, a monumental shift but on a different scale. There are no bodies at the foot of the temple. There are no forced conversions. (Though there is coercion

of the user by the operational demands of a given interface and its controlling software.) There are none of the literal atrocities that accompany political-economic subjugation. Yet to underestimate the degree to which the pressure point of the quill has shifted would be irresponsible at a minimum.

1.

Such a timeline might begin in many ways. It certainly starts with computers (as is already evident by the context of this essay), but it must also begin equally parallel to and independent of computers. The use of computers in and of itself has no transformative effects on literary practice. After all, to use food preparation as an example, there is something about a good recipe that overrides the fact of whether it comes from a book, is hand-written on a note card, arrives through e-mail, comes from a website, or is generated by some "intelligent" refrigerator device monitoring what is in your refrigerator and generating a recipe based on ingredients already on your shelves.

Or put another way, think of Buffalo. If you consider the impact of Black Mountain II, of the Charles Olson lectures, Robert Creeley's historic transgenerational relevance (Black Mountain, the Beat Generation, the San Francisco Renaissance, Pieces), of the procedural work of Cage and Mac Low, of Language Poetry, of the small press archive, of Tedlock and ethnopoetics, of the arrival of Charles Bernstein, the formation of the Poetics Program, the arrival of Susan Howe, the plethora of legendary magazines, readings, talks, seminars, projects, and social vibrancy of the "first generation" of Poetics Program students (including Peter Gizzi, Ben Friedlander, Roberto Tejada, Kristin Prevallet, Anya Lewin, Joel Kuszai, Jonathan Skinner, Jena Osman, Juliana Spahr, and many others), the idea of digital literary practice suddenly takes a different turn. The fact of the computer itself (though clearly topical)—in terms of literary action and of literary community—is not the defining issue.

The backstory to this poetic activity has roots in the concept of the little magazine, the renegade pamphlet, the manifesto, the independent literary press, literary identity as autonomous independent from the benediction of the institution, the role of the library special collection, the bibliography, the archive, the technologies of samizdat production. (This is not to say there can't be a relationship to the institution. Only that the quest for institutional approbation contains its own quid pro quo of concessions.) That is, like the handwritten recipe card

handed from one okra enthusiast to another, like the effects of the printing press once it entered civil non-commercial society, literary production is sui jurisindependent, unbridled, often antagonistic—it does not seek the shadow of the institution for protection from the sun; it exist in a larger historical context. It stands at high noon.

From my own perspective, I would point to Buffalo for a beginning. (For others, this Máshreq or first light might dawn at Brown University with the hypertext workshop, in Bergen with Espen Aarseth, with Hypercard, with Michael Joyce, or with StorySpace and its circle of supportive academics.) In Buffalo, two defining events in E-Poetry occurred: the founding of the Electronic Poetry Center/EPC (1994) and the creation of the Poetics list at Buffalo (1993).

It is fair to say, then, that this is a biased timeline because it is, admittedly, centered on literary practice. This is not to discount alternative paradigms through which other theorists and practitioners are addressing the field: gaming as a metaphor, hypertext, algorithmic variation, theories of postmodernism, semiotics, language as featureless data, among them. Unlike those approaches, this timeline undertakes a different and very personal journey. It does not, then, purport to be a clinical record of specific technical developments. It does not assume the presence of the computer to be the defining condition of the conversation. It treats the computer—though it is the 400-pound gorilla in the room—as an incidental factor. Or put another way, that there is a life of writing, of poeisis, and of performance larger than a hard drive; the computer is a crucial instrument in the tool belt when approaching this field—but to see the larger issues, it is crucial not to focus on the tool but rather on the work at hand.

2.

The history of digital literary events, covering twenty years, seeming generations of activity, brings to the table a number of issues. Most are not literary. However, for a sense of continuity, it is important to understand what questions are on the table, to note where literary elements have been allowed to surface. I would never say, in this wide swath of digital gatherings, that the literary was ever intentionally eschewed. Literary issues may have been overlooked either from nearsightedness or from the heat of the moment. That is, I see the organizers of these events as if standing before a large kitchen stove, say in a restaurant or the kitchen of the Cambridge dining hall. There are a number of pots at full steam, some are

overflowing. I see these organizers as attempting to address the full-boils as immediate—regardless of their long-term value to history or literature—because that was where attention was needed. Literary interests sat on a side burner, in this simile, simpering away, with the full flavor of decades of savory practice, occasionally stirred, but the recipe never fully investigated. That is, literature is not for everyone. But understanding what was in those other, more pressing pots is of significant interest, as literary events do not occur in isolation. A sense of continuity is key.

The snapshot, taken as the subject rushes by, is almost a blur. It is not a portrait, not panoply. It is not a historic record such as Louis Lang's painting "Return of the 69th (Irish) Regiment, N.Y.S.M. From the Seat of War", featured in a *New York Times* article (Pogrebin, "When Applying"), where every detail of a "history" is preserved in paint, a "combination of the sentimental—of the personal stories—and the collective narrative" with its crowd that massed along the bay to welcome the weary soldiers [which] included all manner of society: flower sellers, fruit vendors, dignitaries, newsboys, grieving widows, well wishers and families of the wounded.

Yet, the "pixel depth" (and, yes, meant metaphorically) of this image should be considered. Unlike the panoramic directness of Lang's treatment, there is undoubtedly more detail in the image than immediately meets the eye. Indeed, the "content" exists in exactly that which is uncelebrated: the tonal blue sky, the secondary framing suggested by outcroppings of trees, the distant harbor peppered with three-masters, fallen individuals of the crowd, their hats on the ground, boys selling lithographs, a piece of fruit on a cobblestone texture, the details of white faces. It is that which surrounds the scene that gives context to the scene.

One interesting question that should be addressed is how the digital conversation–in literary terms, once squarely on the agenda at Poetics at Buffalo, veered sharply like the red and orange radar blur of a tropical storm abandoning its course when deflected by land. Indeed, some milestone projects could be seen as benefitting from the emerging dialog between poetics and digital literary innovation that occurred at Buffalo in the late Nineties: UbuWeb, PennSound, the Eclipse series of publications, LINEbreak, *RIF/T: An Electronic Space for Poetry, Prose, and Poetics*, and Jena Osman's "The Periodic Table As Assembled by Dr. Zhivago, Oculist."

The chronology dominates the eastern end of the North American continent, including Buffalo and Brown, crossed the ocean to Bergen, Norway, and touches on Atlanta, Iowa, Germany, and Australia. If the emergence of this field were to be captured in signal publications these might include *The Cybertext Yearbook, Digital Poetics: the Making of E-Poetries, The New Media Reader*, and *New Media Poetics: Contexts, Technotexts, and Theories*, and "Electronic Literature: What Is it?" Of course there is a lot of depth to those pixels, but the blur gives some sense of the motion. It seems to me that these references are but details on the larger canvas, that one must step back to get a sense of the larger picture.

3.

One might hypothesize what makes "the common" within reach. It is no profound act of interpretation to conclude that, though communities will protect common interests, it is more common for such protection to exist within scales of self-interest. With that supposition in mind, one may, nonetheless, postulate a treatise of the common.

In Common: A Treatise

- Communities can be configured according to different rubrics. These typically start with a group with an interest in common, those who are physically collocated, or those who have a root in common. Communities may be relatively stable in population or may be typified by constant fluctuations. They can be voluntary, obligatory, intentional, or accidental. One can be a member of a community and hate it. One can yearn to be part of a community that one will never enter. (Or, conversely, one may never wish to be in a group, paraphrasing Groucho Marx, to which one has been accepted.) At the end, however, members of a community have some form of shared identity, from fleeting to permanent.
- A college commons, of course, is a shared gathering area, usually a grassy square surrounded by buildings. Members leave their private space to enter a common area where they might interact, recreate, or converse.

- Communality, once circumscribed, is characterized by difference within communality. Not only are there different reasons for being a member of a community, but members often manifest different cultural values as participants. Further, within any community there are almost always differences in opinion of what is the most important issue. Agreement in opinion can synergize and motivate action. Disagreement about the importance of issues can divide and even fracture community.
- Some communities are better fractured than whole. However, they almost invariably lose effectiveness through fracture.
- One may usually enter or leave a community at will. Outraged renunciation of a community is usually a less than constructive gesture of respect to the community.
- Alliances and disagreements are personal, emotional, and unavoidable. Hurt, triumph, sincerity, pride, insult, rejection, and even excommunication are all felt intensely and are all emotionally real.
- The physical commons offers a good metaphor since, as a physical location, the commons outlives its occupants. That is, despite one's passion for the various issues that are present, one must realize that the commons remains the commons. If one feels disaffiliated, there's no good reason to cut down the trees and pour acid on the grass. The truth is that when you come out of your building again, like it or not, it will still be there. This reality suggests it is wisest to never damage it. Even if one were to move away permanently, it is only sensible to leave the commons intact–and hopefully improved for one's tenure for the generations that follow.

Ultimately, the idea of a "common goal" has subtle contours that are not simple to decipher. These contours are determined by concepts of acceptable means, tolerable strategies, and the degree of authority that is sought. They are also factored by motivations for group actions, how resulting gains will be shared, and whose interests are expendable in the process. These characteristics all exist in degrees, not absolutes, and may shift unpredictably, depending upon always-fluid social factors.

4.

Of course, the question to be answered at this moment has to do with e-poetries and their community. To investigate this point, I'd like to juxtapose two early declarations that bear decisively on this question.

One is an initial characterization of the EPC, described as:

> The earliest vision of the EPC was that it would be like a community poetry center, the Poetry Project in New York or New College in San Francisco, and would have, like a physical poetry center, a small press library, author libraries, tape archives, reading spaces, exhibit areas, and bulletin boards (Glazier 1996).

The second is Charles Bernstein's incantation for the founding of the Poetics list:

> Above the world-weary horizons New obstacles for exchange arise Or unfold, O ye postmasters (Bernstein 1999)!

Bernstein writes, "The Poetics List was founded in late 1993 with this epigraph serving as its first message. I had been on email for only about a year at that time, but from the first was fascinated by the possibilities for group exchange made available by the listserv format." Almost unimaginably, viewed from the perspective of the present day, an electronic mailing list was itself an unknown medium.

> I remember endless conversations with friends explaining the mechanism: you send out one message to the list address and everyone subscribed gets the message almost instantaneously. And to reply, you simply hit 'R' on the keypad and write your new message. My friends listened in something as close to astonishment as poets doing hard-time ever can. It was as if I were explaining the marvels of xerography to letterpress printers (Bernstein 1999).

Indeed, numerous postings in the early days of the Poetics listserv were postings about what such postings should be about. (This is not uncommon to the self-indulgence and awkwardness of many tweets since the introduction of Twitter.) The idea of community was tantamount. Mark Wallace writes:

> Many of us have different senses of what this poetics e-mail 'virtual community' should be–and indeed the word 'community' is wholly inadequate for the complexity of the environment itself. Perhaps 'network' would be better—although that implies something perhaps less intimate than e-mail often is (and, among many other characteristics, I think po-

> etics e-mail does have an odd intimacy). Still, we don't all 'get along' here, and there are instances when we shouldn't get along (Wallace 1996).

Among these threads of deliberation, David Kellogg reminded the List of a similar debate about literary identity, one of significant influence, that of Language Poetry:

> As an addition to the debate, this from Ron Silliman's introduction to *In the American Tree:*
>
> It is now plain that any debate over who is, or is not, a better writer, or what is, or is not, a more legitimate writing is, for the most part, a surrogate social struggle. The more pertinent questions are what is the community being addressed in the writing, how does the writing participate in the constitution of this audience, and so on (Silliman qtd. in Kellogg 1996).

And Bob Perelman, noting "attempts to unite spheres of discourse" in the list discussion, proposed categories from his then forthcoming book, *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History*, for consideration. Among these were, detailed in his post: genre (poem format), group formation, Grenier, the New Sentence, textuality (Bernstein and Brathwaite), Andrews, gender, literary history, and dream (short story format).

Considering that the referenced book itself is titled, *The Marginalization of Poetry*, it is particularly informative to consider the breadth, depth, nuance, and particularity with which Perelman structures his analysis. The investigation itself includes multiple genres of writing. Beyond that, one notes the non-traditional approaches to the subject. Rather than a direct assault on a single dominant theme, there are numerous ascents up various slopes that in their variety define the theme as a totality. These various ascents include interrogations of thematic materials, studies of specific authors (including, in addition to those named above, Berrigan; Silliman, Hejinian, Dahlen, Howe, Armantrout, and Harryman) and specific texts. Besides consideration (and writing within) specific genres, writing methods, poetics, and histories are considered. The lesson here lies in how the mapping of a variegated terrain, the mix of multiple perspectives, and the heterogeneity of the subject matter—within a given (and possibly predictable) range, of course—is preserved, enriched, and given depth through its own heterogeneous sense of structure. This is the alternative to top-down analyses or, for

that matter, of even arguing a specific position. It is world view through multiple characterizations rather than singular view through world ordering.

The ultimate model might be one that is more socially organic, much the way leaves collect at the edge of a stream. A model that can accommodate the aggregation of members of a group, their accidental entry into the conversation, their proclivity for sticking to the group identity and, given that each member is always endowed with its own particular momentum, their inevitable drifting away from the collective identity. Such memberships can be accidental, unintentional, transient, and of variable duration. They are most notable in the context of years.

If absolute proclamations cannot be made, with what are we left? If group identities cannot be assigned to something as tangible and obvious as a specific technology, does it mean that efforts at digitally-related community are futile? To eschew such categorical definitions has a surprising effect of liberation. That is, when considering literary activity within social, political, personal, and material contexts, when allowing digital issues to waft in and out of larger artistic issues, practices, and disciplines, like bees collecting pollen, one begins to see art function within its medium as a component of the migration of greater arts contexts. Such a realization enriches, contextualizes, and expands the possibilities of digital art practice, rendering its engagement with the cultural conversation much more poignant. Such a realization, in effect, broadens the digital horizon.

5.

E-Poetry 2011, occurring in Buffalo, New York, in May, 2011, can be seen as a milepost in a multiple view of the development of the digital poetry field. At the very least, the fact that the festival has now run continuously for ten years, celebrating a decade of committed service to digital poetry and poetics is in itself commendable. The fact that it marks a worldwide movement, having presented festivals in Buffalo, West Virginia, London, Paris, and Barcelona, is notable. The fact that it clearly set some markers for its own sense of direction for digital poetry practice for the next decade is a fact to be carefully considered.

There are numerous perspectives from which to view the performative, theoretical, and artistic practice breakthroughs signaled by the 2011 Festival. Clearly, these are not solely limited to issues of content, presentation, and structure–how the festival communicates through how it, itself, is composed as an artistic occa-

sion–but also comprises an interrogation the concept of artistic community in and out of digital poetry. Thus, we move into the second decade of this facet of the digital millennium.

6.

As to the present, there are several major committed ongoing organizational efforts in the field as a whole. These include E-Poetry (the E-Poetry digital poetry festivals, Electronic Poetry Center), the ELO (Electronic Literature Organization), and ELMCIP (Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice). Each provides coordination and attention to imbricated constituencies of the field. Each has distinct origins, different members (though these of course overlap), contrasting assumptions, and alternate visions of the direction in which the discourse should be developed. Clearly such organizations further projects in the best interests of all in the field.

But even such well-intentioned efforts will not be realized if one is not aware of historic and cultural critiques. That is, one must recognize that still in the room are the "official ideologies that shoved European man to the apex of the human pyramid" (Rothenberg 1983, xi). That is, a successful rubric must embrace cultural history on a worldwide scale. How is this to be done? It takes inspiration more than innovation; world-making as creativity. It rolls forwards on organizations as they lubricate its path, not as delimiters of practices that erect boundaries rather than opening passageways through mazes. This is not an easy process to describe. It is certainly not a process that necessarily falls into standard funding models. And yet, though such a future cannot even be imagined, one must draw some sense of orientation from words already on record, from an Eskimo song, when:

> The human mind had mysterious powers.
> A word spoken by chance might have strange consequences.
> It would suddenly come alive
> and what people wanted to happen could happen—
> all you had to do was say it.
> Nobody could explain this:
> That's the way it was.
> (Rothenberg and Rothenberg 1983, 3)

The world invoked here is not meant as merely a mythic aspiration; one must think long term to arrive at a balanced global culture. It is the world of centuries past and the world of centuries to come. It is not immediately obvious to the logical facility how to engage the promise of such articulations.

7.

Still practicing are members of the first battalion, early pioneers of the field, some working in new ways, others still perfecting their earlier techniques, others are like elderly folks on the porch still discussing the Great Depression, and there are a number who, like those stricken with some degree of forgetfulness, have wandered out of the picture seemingly forever. Indeed, a colleague of many years, deliberating whether to come to E-Poetry 2011 or not, said, "I have to tell you honestly. As far as I can see, e-poetry is dead." At first it seems a harsh analysis. Yet when one watches what happens in the media: the way kinetic text is used in advertising, the superimposition of text and image in movies such as Wall Street and many other films, the digital doctoring, rearrangement, decoration of time-based media, you can see how one might be pessimistic about the ditch into which the euphoric dancing letters of the early 90s have now fallen. In these examples, textual animations are now common, ubiquitous; they are often vapid beyond notice. One cannot rely on Flash, Google searches, or the surprise of linked words to communicate any longer. Flash now belongs as much to Tide detergent commercials as it did to the most fervent Flash programmer screaming "parole in libertà". Elvis has, indeed, left the building.

In order to place digital practice in a more productive context, it is clear that space must be made, if we are to move forward, for other voices, more diverse practices, different arrangements of the stage.

Such a community is not on the horizon; it is here, around us as we speak. These elements, including younger practitioners, voices from the developing world, and artists performing in diverse categories of artistic production, as suggested by the emphases of E-Poetry 2011, are encouraged to enter the group. To see what is new, one must try on new glasses! These voices are essential and exist independently of medium; they are crucial to the future of E-Poetries. Yet to truly listen and profitably observe these practices, the E-Poetry group must be aware that such participation comes with the field being adaptable, generous within its

frames of reference, supportive. In this manner, everyone gains, a more vigorous future is engaged, more diverse individual practices result; indeed, such an "opening of the field" moves us towards realizing the "commune" within "community," and towards beginning to bring digital practice from its mezzanine observation balcony to the main dance hall floor.

DEVELOPING AN IDENTITY FOR THE FIELD OF ELECTRONIC LITERATURE

REFLECTIONS ON THE ELECTRONIC LITERATURE ORGANIZATION ARCHIVES

BY SCOTT RETTBERG

The Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) was founded as a literary nonprofit organization in 1999 after the Technology Platforms for 21st Century Literature conference at Brown University. Along with Jeff Ballowe and Robert Coover, I was a co-founder of the ELO, and served as its first Executive Director from 1999-2001, and have served on its board of directors in the years since then. Today it is one of the most active organizations in the field of electronic literature, central to the practice of e-lit in the United States and its establishment as an academic discipline. This essay briefly outlines the early history of the organization, the ways that the mission, profile, and the focus of the organization evolved and changed in its first decade, and offers some tentative insights into the ways that an institutionally structured community can facilitate network-mediated art practice.

The discussion is based on archival materials, including notes taken prior to the incorporation of the organization. By revisiting these materials and recounting the process by which the organization took shape, I will describe aspects of the iterative and deliberative process through which a collective institutional identity took shape. Although certain aspects of the organizational structure have remained stable since its formation, its mission, scope, programs, and constituency have changed and evolved a great deal during the period. Taking into account, for instance, that the organization was initiated during the final stages of the 1999 dot com boom primarily as an artist-based organization and has evolved ultimately into a professional academic organization with successful programs including an ongoing series of conferences and publications, it is useful to consider the organization as an evolving community. Even the shifts that took place between the time that the organization was initially conceived and its incorporation are instructive for understanding how a nascent creative community-based organization can change and evolve during its gestation.

The decisions about composition, mission, and programs of the Electronic Literature Organization have been non-trivial in their effects, contributing in a large degree to the conception of electronic literature and the discourse models of the field more generally. The widening breadth of the genres of electronic literature, the professionalization of its academic discourse, and to some degree the credentialing of creative practice have been facilitated by programs of ELO.

THE ORIGIN OF THE ELO 1999-2000

During 1998 and 1999, while I was a graduate student enrolled at the PhD program in English and Comparative Literature at the University of Cincinnati, studying 20th Century American Literature and fiction writing, I wrote a collaborative hypertext novel with William Gillespie, Frank Marquardt, and Dirk Stratton titled *The Unknown*. In 1999, novelist Robert Coover selected the novel as the co-winner of the trAce/Alt-X hypertext competition of that year, and invited us to Brown University for the Technology Platforms for 21st Century Literature (TP21CL) conference he convened there from April 7-9, 1999.[34]

The idea of the TPC21CL conference was to bring together both established e-writers such Michael Joyce, Jay Bolter, Deena Larsen, Stuart Moulthrop, Stephanie Strickland, M.D. Coverley (Marjorie Coverley Luesebrink), and Rob Wittig as well as relative unknowns creating new work on the web together with technologists and technology industry people: a group led by Jeff Ballowe, who helped Coover organize the conference, included for instance the editor of *PC Magazine*, the founder of Macromedia, and a number of people who were leading dot com companies at the height of the 1990s boom, as well as some publishers. The premise of this gathering was that a dialog about new platforms and tools might result, and perhaps even the development of new platforms for the creation of electronic literature. The contingents of writers and technologists, somewhat predictably, did not easily mix.

I was new to both the world of digital writing and the world of the technology industry, so both groups seemed equally strange and fascinating communities, each with their own references, histories, mythologies, internal conflicts, and so on. I had familiarized myself to some extent with hypertext fiction, but the whole universe of e-lit was still largely mysterious to me.

34 Along with Geniwate's digital poem "Rice."

During the conference banquet, I found myself sitting at a table with Coover and Ballowe, who were both to some extent disappointed in the way that aspects of the two-day event had transpired. Ballowe asked me if I had any ideas about how these two groups might work together. As a graduate student/hungry artist type, it seemed obvious to me that one possibility would be for the Internet companies (which appeared to be swimming in unfathomably deep pools of money at that point in history) to find ways to support the new art forms and to apply some capital to the situation of experimental literature. I could imagine further e-lit competitions, like those organized for American poetry by the Academy of American Poets, specifically for electronic literature. I could imagine programs to make commercial software available for free or at a lower price for artists. I could imagine various forms of outreach activities to publicize and make more accessible electronic literature to a wider reading public. I could see the usefulness of a non-profit organization for electronic literature, modeled to some extent on existing literary non-profit organizations.

To my surprise, both Ballowe and Coover embraced these ideas. Ballowe encouraged me to write them up in a business plan, and told me that if Coover and the community of electronic literature authors would support the development of this kind of organization, he would agree to help with the fundraising: provided, that is, that someone would be willing to do the work at the grassroots level. By someone he meant me, and that is the very short version of how I became the first executive director of the ELO. In the months that followed, I worked with Ballowe, Coover, and members of the e-lit community such as Marjorie Luesebrink, Deena Larsen, Stephanie Strickland, and others to put together the initial plan for the organization, to incorporate as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, to organize a board of directors, literary, and technology advisory board, and to launch the first of the ELO's programs.

The first three years of the ELO were a turbulent and exciting period, during which an institutional identity took shape. Historically we can also recall that it was a period during which America went from Internet boom to dot com crash, to the soul-wrenching event of 9/11 and its societal aftermath. I was recently going through some notes and archival materials from that time, including my first notes towards the ELO proposal, which form the basis of this discussion. I will also include some facsimiles of some of these materials. Though I focus here on that

earliest period, I will also detail other aspects of the first decade of the ELO's history, with an eye toward the future of the organization.

After writing *The Unknown* with Dirk and William my surprised first impression of the electronic literature community (or communities) was that it was quite fragmented. I think most who were working in the field at the time would agree that this was the case. In many ways e-lit genres and practices in the US were more clearly divided than they are today. There seemed to be a "hypertext crowd" dominated by authors, mostly fiction writers, who had published work with Eastgate, and a separate "e-poetry crowd." While there was some interaction between these two communities, work and authors rarely seemed to cross between them. The "interactive fiction" crowd seemed to be in an entirely different universe—hypertext authors seem to have been eager to differentiate the type of work they were doing from games. At the TPC21CL conference, there was also a notable division between people who were writing hypertext for the web and those who had been working exclusively in Storyspace. One of the reasons we ultimately chose, in naming the Electronic Literature Organization, to go with the very general "electronic literature" term rather than hypertext or some other more taxonomically specific term was that we wanted the new organization to bridge those gaps and divisions which seemed to be largely artificial and certainly not productive in the sense of representing new media writing as an emergent cultural practice to be taken seriously.

If we think back to the atmosphere of 1999: interest in the Internet had exploded and we were in the midst of the boom period for the dot coms, but the net was still extremely novel, and most people had really only begun to integrate its use into their lives. There were no widely used online social networks, for example. The "home page" was still the default mode of self-representation on the web. Coding HTML was still a valued skill—people could get a job as a web designer or developer with very minimal technical knowledge.

In retrospect I think we can see that period as one in which hypertext fiction was essentially devolving as a specific genre, and during which its most significant "legitimate" publisher, Eastgate Systems, was struggling to keep pace with the popular adoption of the web.[35] Eastgate's Storyspace is a specific platform that was used for the production of many of the early hypertext fictions, and while there is wide

35 See Jill Walker Rettberg's chapter "Electronic Literature Seen from a Distance: The Beginnings of a Field" for her discussion of electronic literature publishing venues during this period.

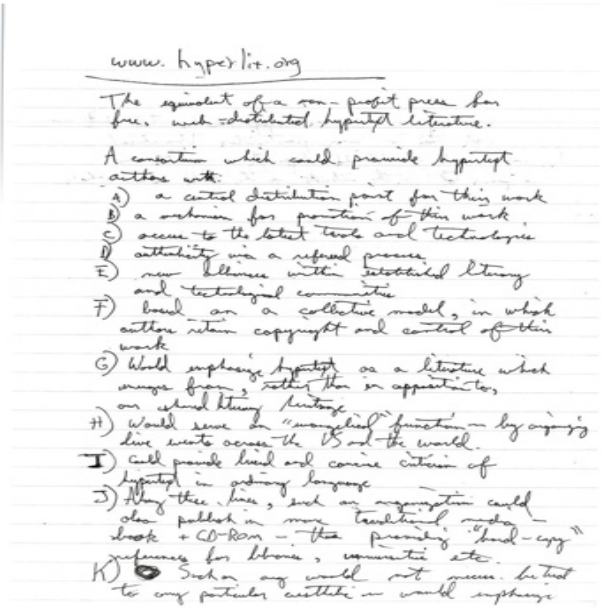
diversity in the styles of writing that authors produced in that platform, the authoring environment and the user interface enforced certain shared characteristics on the works produced in Storyspace. The fact that one publisher released Storyspace works also framed those works within a particular aesthetic and marketing logic. Eastgate promoted itself as the publisher of "serious hypertext." When I met the publisher at TP21CL and heard stories from a number of authors who had published with Eastgate, I had doubts. Authors I spoke with at TP21CL publishing with Eastgate reported poor marketing support for their work, rights conflicts with the publisher, and even already at that stage, issues of technological obsolescence. Aside from the credentialing function and limited editorial support, I could not see how publishing with Eastgate could better serve authors than open distribution on the World Wide Web, where their work could be made more widely and freely available to audiences. Yet whether or not it was to play the specific function of publishing electronic literature, it seemed clear to me that an organization could fill some of the gaps between the seemingly—already—obsolete model of publishing offered by Eastgate and the completely DIY, anything-goes, freewheeling anarchy of the early Web: a mediating layer of organized community rather than a for-profit publishing enterprise.

THE FIRST DRAFTS OF THE ELECTRONIC LITERATURE ORGANIZATION

Here are the first notes I took in 1999, a day after the TPC21CL conference, which would later evolve into a proposal for the ELO. I will transcribe them here, but also attach scans of these hand-written notes:

> The equivalent of a non-profit press for free, web-distributed hypertext literature.
>
> 1. A consortium, which could provide hypertext authors with:
> 2. A central distribution point for their work,
> 3. A mechanism for the promotion of their work,
> 4. Access to the latest tools and technologies,
> 5. Authenticity via a refereed process,
> 6. New alliances within established literary and technological communities,

7. Based on a collective model, in which authors retain copyright and control of their work,
8. Would emphasize hypertext as a literature that emerges from, rather than in opposition to, our shared literary heritage,
9. Would serve an "evangelical" function—by organizing live events across the US and the world,
10. Could provide lucid and concise criticism of hypertext in ordinary language,
11. Along these lines, such an organization could also publish in more traditional media—book and CD-ROM—thus providing "hard-copy" references for libraries, universities etc.
12. Such an organization would not necessarily be tied to any particular aesthetic—would emphasize an "open-source" approach to hypertext not tied to any particular theoretical (agenda), [and]
13. Could work with established hypertext communities and companies, for the interests of the field as a whole.


www. hyperlit.org

The equivalent of a non-profit press for fine, web-distributed hypertext literature.

A creation which could provide hypertext authors with:

A) a central distribution point for their work
B) a mechanism for promotion of their work
C) access to the latest tools and technologies
D) authority via a refereed process
E) new alliances with established literary and technological communities
F) based on a collective model, in which authors retain copyright and control of their work
G) Would emphasize hypertext as a literature which emerges from, rather than in opposition to, our shared literary heritage
H) Would serve an "evangelical" function—by organizing live events across the US and the world.
I) Could provide lucid and concise criticism of hypertext in ordinary language
J) Along these lines, such an organization could also publish in more traditional media—book + CD-ROM—thus providing "hard-copy" references for libraries, universities etc.
K) Such an org would not assume tie to any particular aesthetic—would emphasize

Fig. 1 Rettberg, Scott. "www.hyperlit.org." 10 Apr. 1999. Handwritten notes.

Also among my notes from the TPC21CL are some "Conceptual Statements on Hypertext," a sort of mini-manifesto that also reveals some aspects of my thinking about electronic literature at that time.

CONCEPTUAL STATEMENTS ON HYPERTEXT

1. Our understanding of the basic grammar of hypertext—link structures—still remains to be deeply explored.
2. Hypertext should not be understood as a new genre, but as something that will become multiple genres.
3. Hypertext is evolving into an ideal mode of collaboration—it is more naturally suited to multi-perspectival approaches.
4. Hypertext is less limited by technology than by imagination. The problem is one of making choices, limiting foci, and choosing paths for exploration.
5. Hypertext will enable new forms collaboration between different kinds of artists working in multiple media. Hypertext literature will involve "text" of multiple types. Hypertext will enable "micro-movements" of consensual communities of artists on a previously unimaginable scale. Varieties of convergence will create new forms for theorists to taxonomize.

SIDE NOTE: What would a hypertext opera look and sound like? How would it progress?

6. At this stage, more energy should be devoted to the kind of improvisational play that will generate new forms than the taxonomies, which will delimit then. Now is the time for artists to play with each other.
7. Hypertext is by nature kinetic.
8. Hypertext and print culture are not mutually exclusive. Hypertext is not the end of the book—it is a new form of literature, which is different from the book. Print and electronic literary cultures should be symbiotic and not antagonistic.
9. More hypertexts need to be free. People like free stuff. In order to generate a popular following for the new literature, we need to work to make it more accessible to readers (I haven't read any of the Eastgate hypertexts because I've been in graduate school. To my knowledge, they are not available at my university library. That is a problem).

I later sketched some of these ideas into a draft proposal, and sent them on to Ballowe and Coover. Working most closely with Ballowe, I developed the proposal and an organizational plan. I was able to find an interim draft of that proposal, for an organization, which by this stage had morphed from "hyperlit.org" to "The Electronic Literature Foundation." As a side-note, I think Jeff Ballowe deserves some credit for the organization's adoption of the term "electronic literature"—we discussed the fact that "hypertext" as it was popularly understood at that moment was not really a broad enough term to address the different literary forms we could imagine such an organization supporting and promoting, and further, might sound technical and alienating to the broader non-specialist audience we were hoping to cultivate as a readership. This might be an interesting detail for some scholars interested in the choice of the term "electronic literature": it was chosen not for its specificity but its generality. I think Coover noted at the time that there was something "charmingly old-fashioned" about the term. The term sounded nostalgic from the first day it was used: we didn't want to scare readers away by throwing neologisms at them that sounded like something sent back from an intimidating cybertextual sci-fi future. "Electronic literature" is less a taxonomical category than a welcoming umbrella under which many types of creative production involving machines and literature might take place.[36]

I have posted online this draft proposal for the "Electronic Literature Foundation."[37] This document is largely the product of my dialogue with Ballowe as well with consultations with potential corporate funders and non-profit experts, as well as with other e-lit writers, particularly during the "Cybermountain

36 To be clear, while the Electronic Literature Organization can claim some responsibility (or blame) for popularizing the term, we did not invent it. The earliest use of the term to describe what we now think of as e-lit, at least according to Jill Walker Rettberg's research cited in her chapter in this volume, is in a 1985 essay by Jay David Bolter: "The Idea of Literature in the Electronic Medium." Computers in the Liberal Arts. Topic, 39. Washington, PA: Washington and Jefferson College, 23-34.

37 Http://elmcip.net/sites/default/files/files/attachments/criticalwriting/rettberg_elo.pdf We changed the name from "Electronic Literature Foundation" to "Electronic Literature Organization" when we at some point realized that rhetorically "Foundation" suggests an entity that already has funding to hand out while "Organization" does not. Organizations often apply for grants, while foundations often award them. For all of the jokes we have endured over the ELO acronym over the years—which the organization of course shares with the 70s band the Electric Light Orchestra, you can imagine all the whimsical Tolkeinesque puns that ELF would have engendered.

Colloquium" convened by Deena Larsen from May 28-June 2, 1999 near Denver, Colorado.

Fig. 2 Banner for the Cybermountain Colloquium website.

Larsen, Marjorie Luesebrink, Stephanie Strickland, N. Katherine Hayles, Mark Bernstein, and Bill Bly all gave me input after I presented the proposal to them. Some of these ideas were integrated into the proposal, and Luesebrink and Strickland, in particular, stayed in close contact as the project developed. Both have been deeply involved in the development of the ELO ever since. Deena Larsen was also key to developing the original membership and community of the ELO. When we incorporated, Luesebrink agreed to serve as the first vice-president of the organization, and subsequently engineered the ELO's move from Chicago to UCLA in 2002 and served as its second president.

In reviewing this proposal, it is important to understand that Ballowe's primary occupation at the time was helping to launch Internet companies. We were not thinking of putting together a small volunteer-driven non-profit but something of sizable scale that would operate with an annual budget of about a million dollars. The programs would include a professionally staffed and produced online magazine, *Electronic Literature*, annual electronic literature competitions, a "Tools for Writers" program, symposia and reading tours, and advisory functions for education, publishers, and the technology industry. The organization we conceived at that time would require a staff of ten, including an executive director, a network supervisor/programmer, a development director, a senior producer, a senior editor, a programs director, a publicist, a graphic designer, a staff writer, and an office administrator. We made no small plans, though in comparison to the budgets of Internet start-ups that Ballowe was accustomed to assembling and finding venture capital for at the time, a million dollar annual budget is small potatoes.

Though the ELO has never had anything approaching the budget that the initially proposed endeavor would require, and has accomplished a great deal over time without such resources, I will be the first to say that it should have such resources, in an ideal setting. I think the organization would be able to accomplish a great deal with all of those positions staffed.

An important transition is already notable from my very first notes to this draft proposal: from a focus on the concerns of writers to the more general concern of building an audience for electronic literature (of interest not only of writers but also publishers and technology industry). That is while my first notes were oriented towards specific concerns that I had as a budding author of e-lit (and that I shared with other writers), the draft proposal was very much the product of dialogue with a number of different groups of what we might in grant language call "stakeholders." The proposal had by then been through several rounds of feedback from Jeff Ballowe, who was reviewing the document both as a potential fundraiser with a venture capitalist's sense of what could and not could be funded, and as a former executive of Ziff-Davis, a publisher that had built a magazine-and-online publishing empire around the technology industry. So it is not a surprise that certain aspects of this proposal, such as the idea for a dynamic *Electronic Literature* online magazine, were emphasized.

While my initial notes were more focused on integrating electronic literature with literary culture as I (as a young academic and fiction writer, habituated to used bookstores, lectures, and late-night poetry readings) understood it, at this point the proposal had been tempered both by Ballowe's feedback and by input received from meetings in New York with people active in the publishing industry, such as Peter Bernstein and Alexandra Penny, literary nonprofits, such as William Wadsworth at the Academy of American Poets and Celia O'Donnell at the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses, and people in the Internet industry, such as Gene DeRose, who was at the time the CEO of the dot com Jupiter Media Metrix. So in many senses, the ELO as it was initially formed was not based primarily on the input of academics, but more so on models from the publishing and technology industries. The first funding the ELO received in fact was not from traditional nonprofit source such as a foundation, but a gift from Robert Ziff, of Ziff-Davis, and the second major injections of funding we received were from NBCi, a corporation that no longer exists, and ZDNet, an Internet company which funded the 2001 Electronic Literature Awards competition.

From the beginning of the ELO there was a tension between different constituencies with different goals, even with different paradigms of conceptualizing both electronic literature and the community we were in the process of constituting. Because the ELO was bringing together so many different interest groups, core questions of our collective identity were not immediately resolved. Would the ELO become a publisher? An advocacy organization? An academic organization? A bridge between the publishing or technology industry and writers?

My first impulse was to think of the ELO as a community-supported publishing organization and as an advocacy organization focused on increasing the readership of electronic literature. The original vision of the ELO was focused on providing ways for writers to reach a greater audience, and to make it easier for writers to work in electronic environments. It is interesting to me in retrospect how little of our activity in the early days of the ELO was academic. This is in part because of the constituency of the organization at the time: we had a mix of business people from the technology industry, literary nonprofit experts, such as Bill Wadsworth, and writers involved in the organization. While a few of the people involved were established academics, and while there was a literary advisory board that included a number of writers and academics, the early ELO was not an academic organization. Our first headquarters were not at a university, but a low-rent office in an industrial loft, over a precision gear factory in the Ravenswood neighborhood of Chicago. This small, unfinished office space was subleased from a two-person marketing consultancy, and shared a block of the factory building with a number of artist studios: our office-mates included painters, a ceramicist, and a weaver.

I have attached the first brochure produced by the ELO in 2000, which provides an impression of both the organizational structure of the ELO at the time and our initial objectives and programs (many of which were never realized). One first observation is that over a remarkably short period of time, we managed to pull together a remarkable group of people, representing a number of different constituencies. We constituted three separate boards including a board of directors, an "Internet Industry Advisory Board," and a "Literary Advisory Board." Each of these groups was conceived of as representing a different constituency, and as serving a different role within the organization. In comparison to the board of the ELO as it is currently composed in 2012, it remarkable how few of the original ELO board members had an explicit connection to academe. Rather,

we had on the board two publishers (Mark Bernstein and Peter Bernstein), four Internet/media/technology executives (Jeff Ballowe, Gene DeRose, Larry Wangberg, and Anne Schott), and two non-profit executives (William Wadsworth and Celia O'Donnell). We also had a number of writers and e-writers on the board (Robert Coover, Marjorie Luesebrink, Cathy Marshall, Stuart Moulthrop, and Rob Swigart). While four of these five had academic affiliations, the primary fo-

Fig. 3 The ELO's first membership brochure (2000).

cus of the group as it was composed in 2000 was not electronic literature as it would be studied, processed, and developed in academe, but rather how it might be adopted within the culture more broadly. This year 2000 iteration of the board of directors was structured to serve a more executive-level function than the current board. The idea was that the board would raise money, make strategic decisions, and direct the activities of a staff that would manage the actual programs at the front-line level. Additionally, the Internet Industry Advisory Board included five C.E.O.s of Internet companies, who each made a significant donation to the seed funding of the ELO. The idea at the time was that this group would expand, continuing to help with fundraising and advice on how to interface the cultural

activities of the ELO with the commercial activities of the contemporary Web. Finally, the Literary Advisory Board was a large group of print writers (including such luminaries as John Barth, T.C. Boyle, Harry Mathews, George Plimpton, and Heather McHugh), e-writers (such as Michael Joyce, Stephanie Strickland, Carolyn Guertin, Loss Pequeño Glazier, Bobby Arellano, Rob Wittig, and Rob Kendall), publishers (such the legendary founder of the Evergreen Review, Barney Rossett, and Grove Press's Morgan Entrekin, as well as e-lit journal publishers such as Edward Falco of the *The New River*), and critics and theorists (such as N. Katherine Hayles, Raine Koskimaa, Larry McCaffery, Thomas LeClair, and Joseph Tabbi). The Literary Advisory Board was intended to offer advice on activities such as awards competitions, readings, and publication activities, as well as expanding the reach of the ELO in literary communities.

In retrospect it is almost staggering that we were able to pull together so many influential people in so brief a period. The first board of directors was very productive and energetic in the activity of bringing all these boards together: Coover, Ballowe, and everyone else on the board basically opened up their Rolodexes to the ELO, and it was surprising even to us how many people were enthusiastic about participating in the development of this new organization. These were the days of the irrational exuberance of the dot com boom, and this might sound strange to say, but for a while it seemed as if there was a general sense of acceleration in the air. Within the space of just one year, we had moved from just a few hand-scrawled notions in a notebook to an incorporated non-profit organization that involved about sixty different people, an office, a seed budget, staff in place, and programs underway.

Looking at the list of programs outlined in this brochure, several of them remain the core activities of the ELO today: the "web resource center," the Electronic Literature Directory, e-lit readings and events, and symposia were all conceived at this time. There are a few programs, such as the "Connections Program" which was intended to bring e-lit to libraries, and to connect print writers with e-writers and designers, and the "International Day of Readings" which never saw the light of day. The "Electronic Literature Prizes" did materialize, in the form of the 2001 Electronic Literature Awards.

Los Angeles Times

Southern California Living

MONDAY

Electronic Literature: Thinking Outside the Book

Internet a Hunge Cookboo

First Person

Fig. 4 Article about electronic literature in the *Los Angeles Times*, July 24, 2000, based on interviews conducted after the ELO fundraising event in Seattle.

Chicago Tribune

TEMPO

E-voking muses

The next wave in world literature is gestating in a scruffy Ravenswood office

For TV famili breaking up is hard to do

A Gehry ta of New York

Fig. 5 Article about the ELO in the *Chicago Tribune*, May 18, 2001.

Bicycle boy zaps guests: **Brown semiotics majors who wrote their theses on hypertext** and slept with their professors rub their paws in *anticipation*! You certainly didn't hear it from *us*, but ***Paris Review* editor George Plimpton** is throwing up his hands about the whole **books-are-obsolete** mess and serving cheese to members of the **Electronic Literature Organization**, or E.L.O. (hey, wasn't that a psychedelic 70's band?) at his apartment. **Mrs. Plimpton throws everybody out when some geek uses the word "metafiction."** *[Top-secret Upper East Side location, 6 p.m., by invitation only, 274-0343 ext. 18, don't tell 'em we sent you!]*

Fig. 6 Unauthorized satirical notice of the ELO Fundraiser at the home of George Plimpton, editor of the *Paris Review*, published in *The New York Observer* the day of the party.

SUCCESSES AND FAILURES 1999-2001

During the period that I was the executive director, the ELO saw a number of important milestones achieved. The first and most important was the foundation of the organization, its incorporation, and successful transition to established federal nonprofit status. We were also successful in publicizing electronic literature and the activities of the field quite well. We were aggressive in sending out press releases and developing media connections, and during this period a number of national newspapers, such as the *New York Times,* the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune*, magazines, radio and TV outlets published stories about the ELO and electronic literature more generally. In 2000, we organized fundraising events in New York (hosted by George Plimpton) and in Seattle.

From 1999-2001 we conducted a number of e-lit readings and events, including GiG and GiG 2.0 in Chicago in 1999 and 2000, the Boston T1 Party at the Boston Cyberarts Festival in 2001, e-lit readings at New York University in 2001, contributed panels to the TextZeroOne electronic publishing conference in New York and the 2001 Chicago Humanities Festival, and an electronic litera-

ture show and exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in 2002.[38] During 2001-2002 we organized the Interactions reading series at the University of Illinois at Chicago, funded by the Illinois Humanities Council, which paired electronic literature authors with critics who responded to the works presented. We developed the first iteration of the ELO directory, which was active for several years thereafter. We had the first (and unfortunately to date only) Electronic Literature Awards competition, which awarded two $10,000 prizes in digital fiction and poetry in 2001, and culminated with an awards ceremony at the New School in New York. The website was also very active during this period: news about electronic literature was published on the site on an ongoing basis, a monthly email newsletter was published to our membership, and online chats with featured e-lit writers, conducted by Deena Larsen, took place on a regular basis.[39] For a brief period, the organization was well funded. I was a full-time employee of the organization, and a number of other people were working with us on an hourly or contracted basis. Eric Rasmussen was employed as programs assistant, William Gillespie was developing the news content of the site, Kurt Heintz was contracted to do development. Robert Kendall and Nick Traenkner worked together to develop the bespoke database platform for the first version of the Electronic Literature Directory. Renowned Chicago designer Rick Valicenti developed an identity set for the ELO on a pro bono basis, and a number of paid interns worked with us during this period, including John Vincler, who is still working with the ELO's directory project today.

During this period I was thinking of the ELO both as a national organization and as one with a local home in Chicago. Though we were struggling with all the minutiae and logistical challenges of establishing a non-profit organization operating nationally with a distributed leadership, what kept me going on a day-to-day basis was the support of an active and engaged local community. In addition to the people working directly with the organization, friends like Rob Wittig, Joseph Tabbi, and Roderick Coover were very engaged with the activities of the ELO, and even as the organization was finding its identity, we were actively engaged in the creation of what you might call an "e-lit scene" in Chicago,

38 GiG is not an abbreviation. The idea was that the event would feature about a gigabyte of electronic literature and digital art.

39 Archives of the chats led by Deena Larsen are available on the ELO site.

Fig. 7 Poster for 2000 GiG 2.0 event, poster design by Adam Richer.

fed by creative and intellectual exchanges about electronic literature and what it might become.[40] The two GiG events for me encapsulate the energy of this scene. The first GiG took place shortly after the foundation of the ELO in 1999, and was largely the brainchild of Roderick Coover, who thought we should bring e-lit together with some of the media art he and his colleagues were doing at the Art Institute of Chicago. We had only a shoestring budget. One of Roderick's friends lent us the use of his art gallery, basically a large empty loft space. Kurt Heintz pulled together a number of e-poets for telepresent videopoetry readings from New York and Washington. Musician Paul Kotheimer agreed to play a set and friend DJ Pancake agreed to spin some tunes. The day before the event, we showed up with some lumber and (thanks to Coover's carpentry skills) built a stage, painted a flat white to serve as a screen, jury-rigged a contraption to hang the projector from the ceiling, and put together some booths to show short films. We bought a keg of beer and a case of cheap wine, and friends agreed to tend the bar. We had plastered the Wicker Park neighborhood with posters, but were still surprised at the turnout. It was an impromptu festival, and it went into the

40 In his article "Shyness, Cushions, and Food Case Studies in American Creative Communities," Rob Wittig describes the "e-lit dinners" that he, Joseph Tabbi, Kurt Heintz, and I and a rotating cast of writers met for on a regular basis during this period at Chicago restaurant Moti Mahal.

wee hours of the morning. Among the things I learned from the two GiG events was that people were willing to volunteer their time, effort, and creativity to enable not just a cool party but also a creative convergence to take place. The other thing that I took away from the experience was that e-lit can be presented well with other art forms. At the first GiG we had hypertext and e-poetry but also a bit of Samuel Beckett, films, folk songs, and Brazilian dance music. The GiGs were a celebration of e-lit but also a celebration of a cultural context in which it was taking place. I think that both the ethos of volunteerism and the awareness that e-lit exists within an interzone of other cultural practices has remained very important to the way that ELO has operated in the years since.

The 2001 Awards constituted another major milestone for the ELO, in a number of ways. It was among the first ELO activities to draw in the participation of many different writers who may or may not have thought of themselves as members of the ELO community. With two $10,000 awards on offer, it did not seem to matter a great deal if one was allied to a particular faction of e-lit,

Fig. 8 Flier advertising the 2001 Electronic Literature Awards. The poster, designed by Kurt Heintz, was sent to writing programs and art schools across the USA.

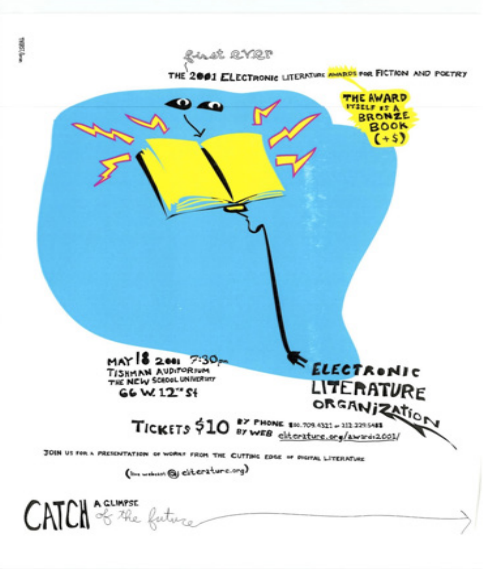


Fig. 9 Poster advertising the 2001 Electronic Literature Awards ceremony. Poster by Rick Valecenti's 3st studios.

hypertext, or e-poetry, or really if authors or designers had considered their work within that frame previously. Many of the people who submitted interesting work to the 2001 Awards had never for instance been associated with Eastgate or with the E-Poetry festival. I think the competition's very openness, with one prize simply designated for fiction and another for poetry, and the wide diversity of work submitted and selected for the shortlists in each category, helped to establish electronic literature as a broader category that could encompass a number of different types of literary practice that make use of digital media.

The selection process for the 2001 Awards was both peer-reviewed and judged. Members of the ELO Literary Advisory Board selected the works on the shortlists. Each of the 163 works submitted was reviewed by at least three people in the first round, and the six works with the highest aggregate scores were then passed on to the two final judges who chose the winners: Larry McCaffery for fiction and Heather McHugh for poetry. The choice of final judges was somewhat controversial at the time, in that neither McCaffery nor McHugh were deeply familiar with hypertext or e-poetry. McCaffery was a leading literary critic, particularly of postmodern American fiction, and McHugh a well-known experimental print poet. Selecting them as judges was an intentional attempt to reach outside of

the existing e-lit subcultures to a wider literary culture, in keeping with a general emphasis on broadening the audience for e-lit.

The range of work shortlisted for the awards was an eye-opener for me personally in terms of what I might consider "fiction" and "poetry" to be in the e-lit context. While the list for fiction included Shelley Jackson's excellent Storyspace hypertext retelling of the Frankenstein myth, *Patchwork Girl*, it also included a number of works that took radically different approaches to the form and interface of fiction, ranging from Talan Memmott's Deleuzian meditation on cyborganized consciousness, *Lexia to Perplexia*, to Mez's *the data[h!]bleeding* texts written in her particularly styled mutation of human and machine language, to Noah Wardrip-Fruin et al.'s *The Impermanence Agent*, which is both a tale of human loss and a degenerative web browser, to Paul Chan's *Alternumerics*, a set of fonts in which each keystroke provides not a letter but a word, phrase, or iconic image, with each font tied to a particular concept or thinker. In every case the materiality of the interface and the particularities of the digital medium played at least as significant a role as did any traditional idea of story. The prizewinner, Caitlin Fisher's *These Waves of Girls*, like *Patchwork Girl*, was both recognizably a story and suited to particular vernacular qualities of the medium. Likewise, John Cayley's *windsound*—the poetry winner—was both explicity procedural and distinctively expressive at the level of language. In every case in both categories for the 2001 Awards however we saw works that were ontologically distinct from print literature, representatives of what was becoming a form between the recognizably literary, the visual, the conceptual, and the procedural.

With a number of people staffing the organization and a fast-paced stream of activities taking place, of course, funding was an ongoing and pressing concern. We had a number of successes in this area, first with the seed funding for the organization, mainly from individuals working in the technology industry, and then with foundations. During this period we received funding from the Ford Foundation, which funded the first Electronic Literature Symposium at UCLA in 2002, and the Rockefeller Foundation, which funded work on the Electronic Literature Directory. In spite of these successes, funding was ultimately the most significant challenge for the organization in its earliest period. When the Internet bubble burst in 2000-2001, many of the individuals who had been very generous with the ELO at the time of its foundation suddenly found their net worth and disposable income considerably diminished. Although the costs of running the ELO were not particu-

larly extravagant, without continuing funding from the initial individual donors, by mid-2001, it did not seem sustainable to the board to continue to plan on funding even one full-time position, and we began to look for other models of how the ELO might be constituted.

2002-2005 TRANSITIONING TO ACADEME AT UCLA

In mid-2001 the future of the ELO looked extremely tenuous. While we had been remarkably successful in securing funding from two major foundations and were beginning to find local funding in Chicago, the state of the American economy had taken a downturn, which would only get worse after the events of September 11. It was clear that we would not be able to sustain the level of activity or staffing we had envisioned during the heady days of the organization's inception, and it was not clear how we could survive as an organization at all if we were not able to fund some staff, an office and some of the other basic costs of running a non-profit organization.

Thankfully, Marjorie Luesebrink and N. Katherine Hayles were very committed to the vision of the ELO and worked to find a place for the organization at UCLA, where Hayles was a professor at the time. Luesebrink stepped up to serve as the second President of the ELO and guided this transition. Luesebrink and Hayles worked very hard to negotiate a hosting arrangement for the ELO, supported by the English Department, SINAPSE (Social Interfaces and Networks in Advanced Programmable Simulations and Environments) and the Design|Media Arts Department. UCLA essentially covered the office costs of ELO, the salary of a half-time managing director, and hosted the website of the ELO. In January 2002, I shipped the last box of ELO materials to UCLA and shuttered the Chicago office.

The arrangement with UCLA both offered the ELO a lifeline that enabled us to sustain the organization through the economic downturn, and I think most importantly nested the organization within an academic context. Particularly with N. Katherine Hayles serving in the role of a faculty adviser and champion, the organization made new inroads within the contexts of literary studies and media arts. We were also lucky to find a skilled managing director in the person of Jessica Pressman, who managed the affairs of the ELO at UCLA for several years before completing her Ph.D. and eventually joining the faculty of Yale University, where she teaches electronic literature in the English department today. Pressman was

succeeded in her position at UCLA by Carol Wald, who also served the ELO well during her stint as managing director.

The 2002 State of the Arts Symposium, funded by the Ford Foundation, was the first and most significant event that took place at UCLA. The generous funding enabled the ELO to invite and cover the basic travel costs of a number of expert panels. Looking back at the topics of the panels for the 2002 symposium, I think they are still matters of concern to the field today: "Writers Looking Ahead," "Navigating the Borders—Edges and Interfaces," "Graduate Programs," "Accessibility and Diversity," "Multimedia Criticism," "Electronic Literature in the University," "Technique: Tools for Cross-Fertilization and Interactivity," "Publishing Models for Electronic Literature," and "Archiving Digital Culture." The


UPS Shipping Record

Monday, January 28, 2002

Received From

Electronic Literature Organization
4401 N. Ravenswood, Suite 304E
Chicago, IL 60640
Phone: 7737693540

Package 1991

UCLA English Department
Katherine Hayles
UCLA Dept of English

Los Angeles, CA 90095
Phone: 3108253534

Tracking Number 1Z AV6 942 03 4291 5653
COD Amount:
* Declared Value
Billable Weight: 25 lbs.
Package Contents computer disks, tshirts, books
Service: Ground 372681

C.O.D. Charge:
Declared Value Charge:
Sat. Delivery Charge:

Total Package Charge: $19.75
Total: $19.75

PAID

Fig.10 UPS shipping receipt for "computer disks, t-shirts, and books" sent from ELO's Chicago office to UCLA.

three keynote addresses also represented three significant voices representative of paradigms of viewing literature's transition to digital media: Hayles, who was and remains one of the most significant theorists working on e-lit, Robert Coover, who has guided dozens of talented writers to experiments in writing for digital media, and Jason Epstein, the former editor of the *New York Review of Books* who was an early advocate of transitioning the publishing industry to electronic publishing models. The conference also included a juried exhibition of works of e-lit, which was an important precedent for the ELO conferences that have followed.

The proceedings of the conference, including "scribe reports" summarizing each of the panel discussions, the keynotes, and selected individual contributions, were published in 2003 in State of the Arts, along with a CD-ROM including most of the works shortlisted for the awards as well as audio from the symposium. This book and CD is still available for order from the ELO. A .zip file of the CD-ROM contents is also available for download on the ELMCIP Knowledge Base. This was the ELO's first formal publication, and began an important strand of the organization's activities.

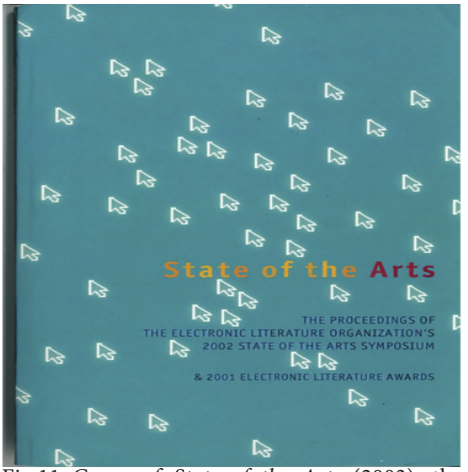


Fig.11 Cover of *State of the Arts* (2003), the ELO's first publication.

The board of directors was undergoing some important shifts during this period, as more theorists, critics, and authors, such as Alan Liu, Bill Seaman, Stephanie Strickland, Thomas Swiss, Matthew Kirschenbaum, and Nick Montfort joined the board of directors while a number of the members of the initial board cycled off. While many of the initial board members were missed, the changes were also in keeping with two general shifts within the organization: one notable turn is towards ELO's development as an academic organization. While in its first iteration the ELO may have been envisioned more as an organization focused on writers and on popularizing e-lit, it was increasingly becoming an actor in shaping an academic field of practice: moving from something more like the Academy of American Poets to something more like the MLA, or perhaps on a more appropriate scale, the Association of Internet Researchers or Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts. This is not to say that ELO was abandoning a focus

on bringing electronic literature to audiences and helping e-lit writers to build a community, just that the channels for doing that were increasingly embedded with an academic context. We were in the process of becoming an arts organization that was also a professional academic consortium. The loss of some original board members enabled the ELO to reconsider its mission and focus. When Eastgate Systems' Mark Bernstein resigned from the board of the ELO in 2003, the ELO was liberated from a voice that had consistently argued against the ELO considering publishing of works of e-lit to be an aspect of its mission. Indeed, the publication of the first volume of the *Electronic Literature Collection* would likely have never taken place had Bernstein remained on the ELO board.

The other thing that the leadership of the ELO realized during these years was that without significant financial resources, we could not conceive of the board of directors as having a purely administrative or fundraising role—that is to say that without money for staff salaries, the members of the board would need to be much more active in the execution of the programs they conceived. To some degree the ELO has operated in this way ever since: as a lean organization with a small budget, driven by the voluntary work of people who care about building their own field of creative and scholarly practice. While more can always be accomplished more quickly with better funding, the ELO has been a prime example of what can be accomplished by an organized group of dedicated people with common goals, even with very few resources.

Locally at UCLA, the ELO conducted a series of events and readings with the Hammer Museum from 2003-2005, and from 2004-2006, Nick Montfort organized an ELO reading series, MACHINE, at the Kelly Writer's House at the University of Pennsylvania. The ELO also sponsored panels, readings, and events at a number of conferences and festivals, such as the ACH, SLSA, and Boston Cyberarts Festival. These sorts of arrangements, series of events in which the ELO serves as a partner with another local cultural institution in arranging and promoting live readings and performances of works of electronic literature, have remained a successful model for the organization into the present day.[41] The ongoing Purple Blurb series at MIT and 2011 presentations of the *Electronic Literature Collection Volume 2* at the Bergen Public Library in Bergen, Norway and at The Kitchen in New York are recent examples of this continuing tradition.

41 Most of these readings and events (and many others) are documented in the ELMCIP Knowledge Base (http://elmcip.net/event).

The Preserving, Archiving, and Dissemination project was a focus of the organization during the UCLA years. The project resulted in the publication of two very important white papers, "Acid-Free Bits: Recommendations for Long-Lasting Electronic Literature" by Nick Montfort and Noah Wardrip-Fruin and "Born-Again Bits: A Framework for Migrating Electronic Literature" by Alan Liu, David Durand, Nick Montfort, Merrilee Proffitt, Liam R. E. Quin, Jean-Hugues Réty, and Noah Wardrip-Fruin. In April 2003, with the Digital Cultures Project, the ELO also co-sponsored the e(X)literature: The Preservation, Archiving, and Dissemination of Electronic Literature conference, organized by Alan Liu at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Although a significant grant to produce and distribute tools to make it easier for writers to produce more sustainable e-lit and to emulate and otherwise preserve endangered works of electronic literature was never successfully attained by the ELO, the PAD project did have a number of significant positive outcomes. The two white papers are frequently cited in discussions of digital preservation, and the project resulted in an ongoing dialogue between the electronic literature community and librarians and digital archivists.[42] Indeed, Rui Torres, since 2011 the leader of the EU-funded Po.EX Archive, an excellent project working on the preservation of Portuguese experimental literature, recently cited "Born-Again Bits" as the inspiration for some of the electronic literature preservation and emulation aspects of his project. The preservation of digital materials in general and electronic literature in particular is a long game, and will remain a concern for actors in the field for decades to come.

In 2004, while Nick Montfort and Talan Memmott were visiting me at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey (in fact after an evening of watching Talan clean up on an Atlantic City casino craps table), we discussed a common frustration we shared with many other e-lit authors and teachers of electronic literature: that while there was clearly a respectable corpus of innovative works of electronic literature, there were still relatively few publication venues. I was teaching electronic literature in a new media studies program there, and every semester I would face the same challenge: that many of the works I had taught the previous year would either be technically obsolescent or would have simply disappeared in the interim. Nick suggested that one way to help address the

42 See Hartling/Suter special issue of *SPIEL* on "Archiving Electronic Literature and Poetry: Problems, Tendencies, Perspectives" (2010) for a number of discussions of archiving and preservation issues specific to electronic literature.

concerns both of creating a new publishing venue for authors and making more work more easily available for academic study would be for the ELO to get more actively involved in publishing electronic literature. We were all in agreement that while the ELO focus on archiving and preserving the past of electronic literature was important, one of the best ways that preservation could be accomplished was by collecting and publishing works of electronic literature, and keeping them freely accessible on the ELO server and elsewhere. In October 2004 Nick and I hammered out the first draft of the proposal for the ELC (*Electronic Literature Collection*), which I have attached.

As with all ELO projects, the nature of the ELC changed from its initial conception to its execution. While we initially proposed an annual publication, which might be tied to a renewed awards program, in actual execution the first two volumes of the ELC, published in 2006 and 2011, have each taken a longer time to produce. Not incidentally, each of the two volumes are more substantial than we initially conceptualized, with each containing about sixty works of e-lit and a well developed editorial apparatus supporting them. A few notable elements of this proposal have however remained consistent:

1. A commitment to publishing the ELC with a permissive Creative Commons licensed basis, making it easy for people to copy and share the Collection and works it contains,
2. A commitment to publish the ELC both on the ELO web server and on other media suitable for other forms of distribution and archiving (such as installation on machines at schools and inclusion in library collections),
3. An editorial structure based on a rotating collective model, in which each iteration of the ELC will be edited by a different small group, who would take responsibility both for selecting works from submissions and for producing the ELC, and
4. An interest in communicating and work with librarians to make the collection available to the public in library contexts.

2006-2010 SETTING CLEAR PRIORITIES AND DEVELOPING INFRASTRUCTURE FOR THE FIELD

During the period of Marjorie Luesebrink's presidency, the ELO had transitioned from an exciting and active but tenuous start-up nonprofit organization to a sta-

ble and established entity rooted in academe. In 2005, Thomas Swiss, who was located at the University of Iowa at the time, took on the role of President of the ELO, with Nick Montfort and Noah Wardrip-Fruin serving as vice-presidents during his term. An important meeting of the ELO executive committee took place at the University of Iowa in 2005. One of the matters discussed there was the revision and approval of a working definition of electronic literature drafted a committee led by Noah Wardrip-Fruin, which specifies that "the term refers to works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer" and provides a number of examples of types of works within the broad category. While this definition has proven somewhat controversial (as "important literary aspects" tends towards the tautological) it was very useful for the ELO as an organization to delimit the type of work on which it would focus. The other important outcome of the meeting in Iowa was also one of delimitation. In Iowa we agreed that for the time being the organization would focus primarily on four main areas of activity: reviving the Electronic Literature Directory, which at that point was no longer operating as originally intended, streamlining and bringing more regular activity to the ELO website, publishing the *Electronic Literature Collection*, and organizing conferences and events related to electronic literature for writers and academics working in the field.[43] These have remained the main priorities of the organization ever since.

In 2006, as N. Katherine Hayles was moving from her position at UCLA to a new position at Duke University, the ELO also migrated from UCLA to the Maryland Institute of Technology in the Humanities (MITH), a dynamic digital humanities research center at the University of Maryland. Matthew Kirschenbaum and Neil Fraistat at MITH guided this transition, and secured vital resources including a half-time managing director position, office space, and technical support for the ELO. This year also saw the publication of the *Electronic Literature Collection*, Volume 1, edited by N. Katherine Hayles, Nick Monfort, me, and

43 There were both technical and conceptual problems with the first version of the ELD. On the technical side, because the platform was custom-designed it was difficult to change and update. Conceptually, the categories by which we had defined the field in 2000 did not seem completely applicable to the practices of the field by the middle of the decade.

Stephanie Strickland.[44] The ELC was funded by a number of partners, mostly individual academic departments, who each donated $500-$1000 to support the publication. Although the release of the ELC 1 was not without problems—we later discovered that the company we hired to produce them did not replicate a substantial proportion of the CD-ROMs properly—on the whole the *Electronic Literature Collection* was even more successful than anticipated.[45] The ELC made sixty works of electronic literature in a wide variety of formats and aesthetic approaches available at one URL as well as on CD-ROM. The Collection was reviewed widely in online and print publications and perhaps even more importantly, was almost instantly adopted on the syllabi of many educators teaching electronic literature in the USA and abroad. I don't think I realized the impact of the publication of the ELC until a year later, after I had moved to Norway and was attending the "Remediating Literature" conference in Utrecht. Nearly all of the papers I heard at that conference, particularly those produced by younger scholars, referenced works that were included in the ELC. Some even referred to the ELC as the "electronic literature canon." While I don't share this view of the ELC as a canon, but rather think of the ELC as sort of periodic snapshot of an emergent field in motion, I do think it is remarkable that only one year after its publication, some scholars were already thinking of it in that way.

In May 2007, the ELO resumed its agenda of independently organized conferences and events with a symposium "The Future of Electronic Literature" at MITH organized by Matthew Kirschenbaum and our new managing director at MITH, Helen DeVinney. The seminar, centered on issues of the archiving, publishing, and internationalization of electronic literature, encapsulated many of the themes with which the ELO remains intimately involved.

In 2007, Joseph Tabbi began his term as President of the ELO. Chief among the accomplishments of his tenure was the revitalization and re-launch

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44 For a more extensive discussion of the process of editing the ELC, see my *SPIEL* essay "Editorial Process and the Idea of Genre in Electronic Literature in the *Electronic Literature Collection*, Volume 1."

45 The sponsors of the *Electronic Literature Collection*, *Volume 1*: Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing at the University of Pennsylvania, Division of Arts and Humanities at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, ELINOR: Electronic Literature in the Nordic Countries, MITH: Maryland Institute of Technology in the Humanities at the University of Maryland, The School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota, and the College of Letters and Science English Department, University of California, Los Angeles.

of the Electronic Literature Directory. The new directory, which launched in 2009, has different conceptual focus and scope than the directory that preceded it. Rather than attempting to pigeonhole works into somewhat arbitrary categories derived from the print tradition and technical formats (for example "Long Hypertext Fiction" or "Short Kinetic Poetry") the new directory is based on a folksonomical model of tagging, so that works can be found and accessed via multiple conceptual, technical, and thematic criteria, which can be adjusted over time as the discourse of the field changes.[46] Even more importantly, the new directory is fundamentally focused on carefully composed short descriptions of work, each of which are intended to serve as fixed starting points for critical discourse. Tabbi assembled an editorial working group of writers and scholars who engage in a peer-to-peer discussion and critique of entries-in-progress. While the ELD is open to contributions from all interested writers and scholars, this core community of contributors and editors, first led by Lori Emerson and currently by Davin Heckman, are central to the process of developing carefully vetted critical entries in which the ELD editors are engaged.[47] In concert with other international electronic literature database efforts, such as the ELMCIP Electronic Literature Knowledge Base we are currently developing at the University of Bergen, and the NT2 database of French-language electronic literature and digital arts, the ELD is making a vital contribution to developing a research infrastructure for electronic literature.

In 2007 we also saw the development of a relationship between the ELO and the United States Library of Congress Archive-It project. For several years, the ELO has provided the LOC with an annotated list of URLs, which are than systematically archived by the Internet Archive and made available as a discrete searchable archive accessible via the Library of Congress. While Internet Archive technology remains imperfect at archiving non-standardized and proprietary web formats, such as Flash, that have been commonly utilized in works of elec-

46 See Joseph Tabbi's "Toward a Semantic Literary Web: Setting a Direction for the Electronic Literature Organization's Directory," and Patricia Tomaszek's "Reading, Describing, and Evaluating Electronic Literature" in *SPIEL*.

47 It should also be noted that undergraduate and graduate students are contributing to the development of both the Electronic Literature Directory and the ELMCIP Knowledge Base in collaboration with faculty at a number of institutions as part of their regular coursework. This sort of research-led teaching, in which students are engaged as co-researchers, will be important to the future success and sustainability of both projects.

tronic literature, at the very least we can be assured that a good representation of the contemporary field of electronic literature will be well documented within the Internet Archive and available for future use.

After joining the ELO board, Dene Grigar established a clear priority to revitalize ELO's conferencing activity beyond relatively small symposia to a fully-fledged congress on the scale of other major academic conferences and festivals and in 2008 organized and hosted the Visionary Landscapes conference at Washington State University. The conference included more than 150 writers, artists, scholars and other presenters. Grigar strived to achieve a balance between readings and performances of e-lit, paper presentations, and panel discussions. The conference was also notable for the fact that media artworks were presented and exhibited alongside clearly literary works: it was a conference of electronic literature and its boundary disciplines, with an awareness that border zones are often the areas where the most interesting activity takes place. The conference was a success and offered the ELO a model of how continue to develop a large-scale biennial congress of the field.

This success was repeated in 2010 at Brown University, with the ELO_AI (Archive & Innovate) conference at Brown University organized by John Cayley and the Brown Literary Arts Program. The Brown University event was a homecoming of sorts for the ELO, as a decade after its inception, the organization returned to the campus where it had first been conceived. I took a great deal of pride in the fact that more than a decade after Jeff Ballowe, Robert Coover, and I had spent a few moments at a table together musing over the notion of what an electronic literature organization might be, the ELO was not only still alive but thriving in its work, central to a vibrant field of creative and academic practice.

2011 AND BEYOND: CONTINUITY, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES

In 2011, *Electronic Literature Collection Volume 2*, edited by Laura Borràs Castanyer, Talan Memmott, Rita Raley, and Brian Kim Stefans, was published online. The ELC2 was positively reviewed and has had a significant impact in enhancing electronic literature curricula, exposing new audiences to the field, and expanding and enriching our understanding of new forms of digital literary practice. Electronic Literature Collection Volume 3 (ITAL) is currently in progress. The editorial team of Stephanie Boluk, Leonardo Flores, Jacob Garbe, Anastasia Salter

are bringing the perspective of a new generation of electronic literature authors and scholars to the project, which promises to continue to be a central publication in the field. Work on the Electronic Literature Directory has also proceeded apace. The Consortium on Electronic Literature (CELL), an affiliate network of electronic literature organizations, projects, and institutions, has also begun to take shape.[48] Through the CELL, entities such as the ELO, NT2 in Canada, ELMCIP, Laboratoire Paragraphe, Hermeneia, the Po.Ex Archive of Experimental Portuguese Literature, the Australian Creative Nation project, MIT, the Brown University Digital Literary Arts Archive, ADEL Siegen, and others are beginning to work together on electronic literature projects such as sharing information between online databases, bibliographic and archiving standards for electronic literature, coordinating the timing and publicity of events and so forth, on an international basis. From 2012, the ELO has moved to an annual conference schedule, with events alternating between American and international locations. Recent conferences have been hosted at West Virginia University (2012), in Paris (2013), at the University of Milwaukee (2014), and the University of Bergen. Since 2011, the ELO has been based at MIT.

The ELO is now stable in a number of ways. For the near term at least, it is focused on producing four programs: the website and related communications (such as a Facebook group and active Twitter feed maintained by Communications Director Mark C. Marino) which share news and information relevant to the field, the production and maintenance of the Electronic Literature Directory, the periodic publication and distribution of the *Electronic Literature Collection*, and the organization of a major biennial conference. Though not precisely a structured program, a fifth strand of activity that has remained consistent is the co-organization of readings and seminars with other partners, typically organized and championed by an individual ELO member or board member. Yet behind the scenes, ELO still struggles with challenges common to many nonprofit organizations. Since the move to UCLA, ELO has always to some extent been dependent on the generosity of an academic host to fund a managing director position and office. The organization has struggled to build and maintain a membership that not only participates in its program but that is willing to make financial contributions to keep the lights on. There is significant overhead involved just in the procedural mechanics of keeping

48 See http://cellproject.net.

a non-profit organization running, particularly one with a fairly involved technical infrastructure. While the ELO has had some successes with grants, it is difficult for an essentially all-volunteer organization to compete with the apparatus assembled by major research universities who are competing for the same Digital Humanities funding. I'm often frustrated by how long it takes for ELO projects to move from concept to fruition. In the first few years of the organization's history, when we did have more significant funding and were able to pay for staff, our programs moved at a different pace. The best thing that could happen to the ELO would be the development of a significant endowment, which could fund at least one full-time position, freeing the organization to focus more on its programs and less on the mechanics of securing basic operating funding. Failing that however I'm proud of the fact that even during periods when the ELO has been operating with the most minimalist of budgets, its programs have always moved forward. In sixteen years, it has never gone into hibernation.

While all of the individual programs and events I have mentioned here have contributed in some way to shaping the field of electronic literature as it is currently practiced, I think the most important factor in the ELO's contribution to the field of electronic literature is ultimately not any of the programs at all, but rather the very fact of the community which has developed and participated in them. Over the years, I have spoken with a number of teachers who have told me the story of how they convinced skeptical colleagues and curriculum committees that teaching literature or writing based in digital media could be worthwhile. The fact that they could go to a website that explained what electronic literature is, that provided examples they could teach, that demonstrated that other scholars and writers across the USA and around the world were writing and doing research in the topic, provided them with much-needed evidence that electronic literature was legitimate, vital, and worthy of intellectual engagement. This is important because, particularly in the early years, many electronic literature writers and scholars are fairly isolated within traditional academic structures. I have also heard from leaders of other international organizations and projects, such as Quebec-based NT2, that the ELO served as an inspiration and model as they put together the plans that led to the development of their projects. The ELO has most fundamentally provided a meeting place (albeit a decentered one) for a field to gather, for a self-sustaining creative community to develop and thrive.

INTERACTIVE FICTION COMMUNITIES: FROM PRESERVATION THROUGH PROMOTION AND BEYOND

BY NICK MONTFORT AND EMILY SHORT

The interactive fiction (IF) community has for decades been involved with the authorship, sharing, reading, and discussion of a type of electronic literature and computer game. Creating interactive fiction is a game-making and world-building activity, one that involves programming as well as writing. Playing interactive fiction typically involves typing input and receiving a textual response explaining the current situation. From the first canonical interactive fiction, the minicomputer game *Adventure*, the form has lived through a very successful commercial phase and is now being actively developed by individuals, worldwide, who usually share their work for free online.

Although it is typical to speak of "the IF community," there have actually been several communities representing different interests, different types of authoring systems, and various natural languages. Until around 2005, online archives, discussions, newsletters, and competitions focused the energies of IF community members. But since the middle of the 21st century's first decade, interest in IF has broadened beyond its earlier boundaries and academics, students, and players of indie games who are not IF community members that have become active as IF players. Groups have met in person in different cities to play games and discuss work in progress. We consider the IF community's early formation and the way it, along with concept of interactive fiction, has evolved in recent years.

THE FORM AND CONVENTIONS OF INTERACTIVE FICTION

Interactive fiction as typically defined is a form in which the interactor or player types (or in some cases, selects) actions for a particular character to undertake; the program responds with a report of what happens. The works that have been in this form present puzzles and challenges as well as literary pleasures; they simulate worlds and perform limited but effective natural language understanding. Interactive fiction has often meant more or less the same thing as "text adventure," although even the most text-fixated would at least admit that interactive fiction

can be text-based and does not have to exclude multimedia elements. Several resources are available with general discussions of interactive fiction and its history (Nelson 2001; Montfort 2003; Montfort 2007).

Interactive fiction can be defined formally as a particular type of computer program with particular aspects. It involves an environment or world that is simulated to some extent, usually with objects, rooms, and characters explicitly represented in code. The player or players usually interact by typing some sorts of natural-language commands such as "pick up the ax", "go east" (which can be abbreviated east or e), or "play with Floyd." A rather small set of commands will actually work, but many of the obvious, physical actions involving objects in the environment are supported. These commands indicate what the current player character, the somewhat avatar-like entity within the interactive fiction world, should do. Sometimes the player character refuses or fails to perform a particular action, but even this can be amusing or informative, helping those playing to understand the way the fictional, simulated world operates.

Here, for example, is a bit of a transcript of interaction with *Lost Pig*, the 2007 Interactive Fiction Competition winner by Admiral Jota. In this game, the player character is Grunk, a rather inarticulate and dense orc who also serves as narrator, explaining what happens to him. In this snippet, the player finishes solving one puzzle and then attempts another action which Grunk declines to perform.

CAVE WITH STREAM

> Tunnel come to little cave here, but wide stream block way east. Grunk not see much on other side. Not know if tunnel keep going or stop here. Only light that Grunk see come from bright room, far off to west. But Grunk hear lots of water.
> There stone bench next to stream.
> Seeing over there not easy in dark, but Grunk think there little reddish thing on other side of stream.
>
> >get red thing with pole

Grunk stick pole out across stream and poke red thing with end of it. Red thing stick to end of pole! Grunk pull it back and find out that thing really key, so Grunk take key.
Pole not feel sticky to Grunk, and key not feel sticky too. Wonder why key stick to pole.

>eat key

Eating key maybe fun today. But it not so fun tomorrow.

The two major attributes of an interactive fiction program—the simulation of a fictional world and the understanding of at least a limited form of natural language—correspond to the two major components of an interactive fiction game in the classic sense, the world model and the parser. State-of-the-art interactive fiction development systems, mainly represented today by Inform 7, now provide a customizable world model and parser with extensive capabilities, but the functions of these two components are also found in one-off games such as the original *Adventure* and *Zork*. Because an advanced interactive fiction is a reasonably complex computer program, creating a game generally requires programming as well as writing.

Interactive fiction has formal computational and interface qualities, but it is also marked by conventions. Low-level conventions include the definition of space and the navigation of it using compass directions and abbreviations for them (n, ne, e, etc.). Since interactive fiction has good capabilities for modeling objects, containment, and carrying things around, it is also conventional for the solution to puzzles to involve objects that are found in various parts of the simulated space. Hence, the stereotypical interactive fiction adventurer is a sort of kleptomaniac and bag person who obtains everything that can be picked up. Finally, interactive fiction has been marked at various times by adherence to and exploration of popular genres: Initially, in the minicomputer era, the underground or house-based explorations that typify Dungeons & Dragons sessions; later, work in many popular genres beyond fantasy (science fiction, mystery, romance, humor, etc.) thanks to Infocom and other companies; and, currently, work of many sorts that sometimes falls into a well-defined genre but is often harder to classify.

Several graphical games were produced by Infocom, Magnetic Scrolls, and other companies—ones that were marketed and understood as interactive fiction, and had text-based exchange at their core. Even in the strictest definition, work that takes natural-language-like textual input, produces textual output, and simulates worlds is likely to be understood as interactive fiction regardless of whether it has graphics, sound, or even limited sorts of animation. The About.com "Interactive Fiction" site and the later Brass Lantern included graphical adventure games in the category. While the major aspects of interactive fiction have been well-understood and recognized by authors and players for several decades, the definition of interactive fiction has not been completely clear in every case.

Without conducting an extensive discourse analysis, interactive fiction as discussed clearly falls into more than one domain. The people who work in this form call themselves "authors," write "story files," and generally welcome the use of the term "interactive fiction" as descriptive of their work, embracing literary terminology and drawing on their avid reading. IF authors also almost universally see themselves as making "games"–the default term for a work of interactive fiction. IF authors have participated in "electronic literature" readings, conferences, and collections; many also see strong connections to the gaming community and to design issues and practices there. This is hardly an unusual condition for an electronic literature community. Digital artists, whether involved with net art or installations, sometimes work in literary and textual forms without identifying as writers or authors at all. That interactive fiction authors identify as game-makers as well as programmers and writers may be more representative of electronic literature practice instead of being exceptional.

FROM MINICOMPUTERS TO THE MARKETPLACE

Interactive fiction has existed for more than thirty years, first on minicomputers, then as a leading form of entertainment software thanks to Infocom and other companies, and most recently as an activity of programmer/writers who develop IF systems, libraries, and games for the love of it.

Beginning in 1977, text-based adventure games for mainframes and minicomputers were available to a few, mainly through colleges and universities. In theory, these could be modified, but it was relatively uncommon to do so—Don Woods' revisions to Will Crowther's original *Adventure* notwithstanding. Local players were, however, stimulated to imitate *Adventure* and *Zork* and in a few

places, most notably Cambridge, England, to create generalized adventure compilers in order to create new challenges for their friends. Playing communities were highly local and restricted to those who had access to academic or business computers. Because adventure games could be played on terminals in communal facilities, access often required friends to band together to play when the mainframe was not required for official purposes. Circumstances such as these brought together the cluster of MIT students in 1977-9 who were to found Infocom.

By 1982-4, IF had become something mostly played on home computers with family or friends. In the US and the United Kingdom, commercial IF cost about twice as much, adjusting for inflation, as a brand new AAA console game in 2011. Purchasing an Infocom game entitled the owner to join the circulation list of The New Zork Times, a promotional publication featuring previews of coming releases, letters to the editor, puzzles, and contest submissions from players. In Italy, text adventures were distributed on cassettes accompanying monthly magazines, with each month's magazine providing solutions to those of the month before (Cordella 2011), while the Dinamic company in Spain published "Adventuras Conversacionales" (Neito 2012). In all of these communities, unauthorized copying of interactive fiction was typical, with computer owners meeting in local user groups to share disks and exchanging news in unofficial fanzines. But to the extent that there was a community around home-computer-based interactive fiction in this period, it was a community of players and users rather than of authors, partly because the hardware and available software were insufficiently powerful to create sophisticated new work and partly because the only centralized modes of communication were through the commercial companies who sold interactive fiction.

It was not until the age of modems and early public access to the Internet that IF really developed a coherent and independent authoring community.

THE EARLY IF COMMUNITIES

For much of the post-commercial era, IF was primarily developed by and for a few related communities: the mostly English-speaking creators who identified themselves as "the IF community" along with those writing in other languages, among them Spanish, French, Italian, German, Czech, and Russian.

Two USENET newsgroups, rec.arts.int-fiction and rec.games.int-fiction, hosted the first far-flung discussions of interactive fiction and helped to con-

stitute an early IF community. The two newsgroups were founded and came to be used for interactive fiction discussion in the late 1980s, before the invention of the World Wide Web. In these early days of public access to the Internet, it wasn't necessary to be Internet-connected to have online discussions of interactive fiction. CompuServe's Gamer Forum and the Adventure Game Toolkit (AGT) became the home of early development in the period 1990-1992. *Shades of Gray* was written by seven people communicating only through a private CompuServe forum, with lead author Judith Pintar organizing and editing the contributions. To supplement discussion on the newsgroups and on CompuServe, two newsletters were founded: SPAG (initially, the Society for the Preservation of Adventure Games; later, the Society for the Promotion of Adventure Games) and XYZZYnews. For more synchronous communication, community members began to communicate on a MUD that largely functioned as a chat room.

An important early resource for individually-authored interactive fiction was the IF Archive. It was founded in November 1992 by Volker Blasius, and was originally hosted at the German National Research Center for Information Technology. The archive was initially located at ftp.gmd.de; as the hostname suggests, it was an FTP site, one that allowed IF authors worldwide, working in any language, to deposit their freely-downloadable games. Although one could access FTP sites through popular Web browsers, it was not until January 1999 that the archive came fully onto the web. Andrew Plotkin and Paul Mazaitis set up IFArchive.org that month. It was initially a mirror of the German FTP site and later, when that site went offline, became the main home of the IF Archive (Granade 2012). The directory structure from the original site has been maintained over the decades.

Also very significant in the formation and existence of the IF community was the IF Competition, also simply called the Comp. It was started by Kevin Wilson in 1995; Wilson later founded the IF newsletter SPAG. The Comp was announced on the newsgroups and welcoming entries in the then-recent free IF development system Inform and in TADS, a capable system which was at that point sold as shareware. The first Comp had twelve entries, which were unlike Infocom games and other commercial games by virtue of being shorter; they were meant to each be solved within two hours. As with the IF Archive, SPAG, and other resources important to the early IF community, the Comp was simply started by

a single individual and was run without institutional support or large-scale preplanned organization.

Shorter Comp games made interactive fiction more accessible as well as easier for authors to finish. Nevertheless, the original entries and those in the early years (the Comp ran annually, as it still does) were largely made by the IF community for the IF community. Few had the "feelies" and help menus that made commercial games and early shareware games more understandable to those who did know about interactive fiction already. Although the 1998 winner, *Photopia* by Adam Cadre, featured detailed instructions and the 1999 winner, *Winter Wonderland* by Laura A. Knauth, had a status line that indicated where adjacent areas were, there was generally little emphasis on creating detailed tutorials and assisting new players. Highly referential games such as *The Cabal*, *Pass the Banana*, and *Stiffy Makane: The Undiscovered Country* were created and distributed largely as in-jokes for those aware of the form, the conventions, and the community. This was not unprecedented, as some late commercial games such as *Eric the Unready* parodied fantasy gaming. But these sorts of in-jokes highlighted the importance of community not just to styles of play and systems of review and discussion, but also to interactive fiction production.

What is called "the IF community" is not the only community focused on interactive fiction. While the IF Archive hosted games in any language, different national and language communities arose as individual IF authors wrote games throughout the world. There are English-language histories of interactive fiction development and communities in Italian (Cordella 2011), French (Labrande 2011), and Czech (Svelch 2011). While there is not great stratification by development platform, the IF development systems ADRIFT and Quest have their own forums and developed communities of their own. And there is a separate English-language community using the same mainstream development platforms that is interested in a particular type of interactive fiction: "adult interactive fiction," or erotica. This "AIF" community has its own annual competition, archive, and central site. Among the many differences that are seen in IF playing and authoring worldwide, there are some commonalities, which include the ad hoc individual development of resources, the distribution of games for free, and the bottom-up growth of communities.

EXPANDING COMMUNITIES AND BEYOND THE COMMUNITY

Between 2000 and 2010, the self-definition of the IF community began to change. Many works of interactive fiction are now produced and played by people who do not consider themselves part of any IF community, including academic users and creators associated with independent or casual gaming. Local groups have started to hold in-person meetings in several cities and have sponsored events that appeal to typical IF community members as well as others.

CHANGES IN GAME DISTRIBUTION

As commercial video games have come to rely less on boxed sales during the mid-2000s, the corresponding rise in independent game distribution has brought with it a number of websites and blogs. Several of these—notably JayIsGames (covering casual and some independent games, founded 2003), PlayThisThing (covering indie games, founded 2007), TIGSource (covering independent games, forums started 2007)—have included recurring coverage of interactive fiction among their offerings. Both TIGSource and JayIsGames have sponsored IF competitions that did not arise from and were not targeted at any IF community but at their own communities of independent gamers. These competitions have brought new players to IF and have attracted authors who do not see themselves primarily as IF authors, but as indie game authors who happen to have an interest in interactive fiction as one of several possible forms. Game jam events such as Ludum Dare (begun in 2002) have led to the creation of IF as just one of many genres of games accessible enough for a small team to produce within a few days.

These developments place interactive fiction on a continuum with other types of independently produced, small-budget, and experimental games, and have encouraged new authors to experiment in the form.

IF FOR OTHER PLAYERS

An increasing amount of interactive fiction is written for players outside the IF community; much of it is not even announced to the community at all. In addition to the IF games written by, and for, independent gamers, several new categories have emerged.

Interactive fiction has found extensive use in education, either in the form of IF written by experts to teach students (such as *Voices of Spoon River* and other projects by the Creative Learning Environments Lab at Utah State University) or IF created by students as a way of presenting research on a given era or site (as with the historical IF works created by students of Jeremiah McCall and Christopher Fee). Student historical works—often written by authors who have never used any programming language before, and who are graded on content as much as form—tend to focus less on procedural complexity or rich puzzle design than on establishing a sense of place and time. Such work captures the feel of a diorama or a reenactment rather than of a narrative puzzle game.

Various special-interest groups have adopted IF as a way to provide entertainment targeted to an underserved market. *Illuminated Lantern's 1893* (2002) is a detailed and illustrated IF reconstruction of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, sold primarily through museum gift shops and local Chicago venues. Cumberland Games & Diversions marketed *Treasures of a Slaver's Kingdom* (2007) to an audience who already enjoyed other Cumberland products such as RPG rulesets, maps, and miniatures for tabletop gameplay. Along similar lines, the geocaching hobbyist community has created a series of challenges based around existing or custom-written interactive fiction, using the IF to provide narrative context to the geocaching tasks (Hines 2012).

CHANGES IN RESOURCES AND THE COMMUNITY

During the period 2003-2008, the IF community moved towards an increasingly distributed model for most of its primary institutions, introducing IFDB (a database for games), ifwiki (a wiki for information about the community), Planet-IF (an IF-themed blog aggregation site), and the intfiction forum (a bulletin board forum to supplement the USENET newsgroups).

IFDB, the "Interactive Fiction Database," brings many new projects to the attention of the IF community, since it can be edited by any registered member and is designed to link to games wherever they may appear. It has supplanted and expanded the functionality of Baf's Guide, a website cataloging the contents of the interactive fiction archive and maintained primarily by Carl Muckenhoupt ("Baf") and a handful of volunteer assistants. Because Baf's only covered materials on the archive, it omitted many commercially available games and any IF that had not been formally submitted to the archive by the author. In contrast, IFDB

documents a number of student projects, current commercial games, and out of print works. Other features, such as an RSS news feed, user-run recommendation lists and polls, and game rankings, are intended to help newcomers quickly identify works they might find interesting, and keep community members aware of less-known projects.

IFDB has also changed the way the community supports new authors. The constant news feed and rapid review cycle of IFDB have considerably reduced, if not actually eliminated, the longstanding community problem that less-known authors and idiosyncratic games often went unnoticed and unreviewed. Before IFDB, the announcement of a game's release on the Usenet forums could be quickly vanish from the recent post lists, and there was little to raise awareness; a game might be reviewed in SPAG, but SPAG's quarterly release cycle meant that it might be months before the author of a new game received any feedback at all, and by the time a review appeared, it would be difficult to build momentum. In the era of IFDB, it is much more common for a newly released game to begin receiving ratings and reviews within a week or two.

ifwiki (2005) and Planet-IF (2008), meanwhile, have created new venues for collecting information and presenting long-form theoretical discussion. Articles by community members about the craft and theory of interactive fiction formerly tended to appear on the rec.arts.int-fiction newsgroup or in SPAG or XYZZYnews, whereas it is now typical for them to appear on personal blogs that are then aggregated through Planet-IF. This means that the content is more visible to non-community readers and is often presented in a context with a blogger's other interests. ifwiki, meanwhile, provides a centralized repository of links to past and present IF discussion, news, and competitions: a significant service now that discussion has spread away from one or two central locations.

The opening of the IF community to new influences is a self-reinforcing process. As new groups of people outside the IF community have become interested in writing in the form, there are more and more authors who see their primary audience elsewhere, but who turn to the IF community for tools and technical support. Many of these post on the intfiction forum, established in December of 2007, which has gradually replaced the USENET group *rec.arts.int-fiction* as the primary space for technical support and community announcements. The increased visibility of the IF community, and increased engagement of people

writing for different audiences or with different concerns, has broadened the collective sense of what IF is or might be.

PLAYING AND WRITING TOGETHER

The period 2008-2011 saw the growth of local, in-person groups for IF enthusiasts, with regular meetings in the Boston area, Seattle, San Francisco, Chicago, and Vancouver, BC. Special events several times a year draw participants from across North America and Europe. These groups often participate in shared play sessions (with one person typing commands at a time, but the entire group suggesting what to do next), writing workshops, and presentations on various aspects of IF craft. Speed-IF, traditionally a two-hour game jam organized through ifMUD, has also become a popular activity in person, often with multiple authors working together on the same project. ClubFloyd, which was founded in 2007, holds weekly online meetings for collaborative play, and as of June 2011 has posted transcripts and player commentary for over 180 games. In the context of shared play and authorship, new IF players can be taught how to interact with a game by more experienced participants.

The move towards more personal contact has affected the writing of IF as well as the play experience. Although interactive fiction has a collaborative heritage, with *Zork* initially put together by four people at MIT and *Shades of Gray* developed by seven authors via CompuServe, most IF over the past few decades has been either single-authored or divided up among an author, a programmer, and occasionally an illustrator. An increasing number of IF games are created by multiple authors, as found in the Textfyre model of distributing work among a team and with alternative models for the participation of large numbers of collaborators, seen in *Spaceship!* and *Alabaster*.

Finally, the movement to encounter and discuss interactive fiction in person has allowed IF author/programmers to share pieces that would be hard to present over the web, such as the various installation pieces seen at the first IF Demo Fair in May 2011 (Monath 2012).

EXPANDING CONCEPTS OF INTERACTIVE FICTION

The concept of interactive fiction embraced by the IF community has expanded to include works that accept alternative forms of input (multiple choice or key-

word selection, for instance, rather than limited natural language understanding) as well as experimentation in world modeling, the narrating of events, and modes of output.

In the period from 2008-2011, outreach—defined as attempts to raise interest and engagement in IF—has been one of the IF community's core concerns. Increased engagement with novice players has demonstrated that many people who might otherwise be interested in reading or playing IF encounter two major barriers. The two barriers identified are that of access (figuring out how to download and run IF on their own computers) and that of gameplay proficiency (learning how to type commands to a game successfully in an appropriate subset of English).

IF IN THE BROWSER

Players coming to interactive fiction from a background in casual games often expect to be able to play a game within a browser and without downloading anything. The need to provide a seamless experience has spurred the development of a number of new options to facilitate online play. Parchment and Quixe run Inform-produced game files in a browser window, while still-in-progress work on the TADS 3 and Alan languages will run games on a server and update the player's game state via AJAX or similar technology.

Presenting IF in a browser window generates its own new set of player and author expectations. Typography and text styling has for a long time been at best a secondary concern: interpreters on different operating systems present text in different ways, in different fonts, colors, and marginal arrangements. Traditionally, the tools used by the IF community have offered the author only limited control over this presentation. Portability across a large number of platforms (including small-screen mobile devices and computers being run with a screen reader by blind players) was often considered more important than the ability to craft a specific visual experience, and providing an attractive textual surface was often seen as the job of the interpreter creator rather than the author of a specific game.

Introducing IF to the browser window, however, implies that IF reading should feel similar to reading other web-styled text, with similar expectations for smooth scrolling, attractive layout, and visual integration with the surrounding website. Moreover, text presented on the web is often styled directly by the author of that text, and people coming to IF creation from a background of web author-

ship bring those expectations to bear. An increasing number of user requests and suggestions involve the ability to style output, display images and videos, and dynamically change text that has already been printed to the screen.

New tools now in development, including Juhana Leinonen's Vorple interface, are designed to allow IF authors to make better use of the range of web-based possibilities, such as culling text and information from other websites to affect gameplay and embedding YouTube video into a game screen. CSS-based styling options for Quixe are also available, for projects that do not require a full range of JavaScript options but which would benefit from a specific style. Considerable effort is still required to use these tools, but they have enabled projects such as *Ultimate Quest* (Emily Short 2014), a Quixe-based text adventure commissioned by marketing firm AKQA and reskinned to include a log-in screen, background art, font control, and Twitter integration.

IF is also being adapted for mobile devices and ebook readers. Because the complexity and cost of other games on these platforms is lower, and because these devices are marketed especially to people interested in reading, ebook platforms especially are considered an excellent market for IF. The technical challenges of slow hardware, proprietary software, and restricted distribution (e.g., only being able to share an iPad IF work through Apple's store) have proven difficult but not insuperable. Frotz for the iPhone and iPad runs a large number of Z-machine games, allowing the player to select new material to play from a built-in browser pulling content from IFDB. Other projects have been started to present single games or game packages on the iPad, Kindle, and Android platforms; the first one to result in a released game for the Kindle was The King of Shreds and Patches.

Discussion about interface and English-like, typed commands is more vexed. Parsed input has historically been widely regarded as one of IF's defining features. The desire for greater accessibility and outreach, however, brought discussions about whether the parser was in fact essential to the definition of the form. IF practitioners and theorists have argued that part of the particular allure of interactive fiction is the way it challenges players to understand the game world thoroughly in order to make progress (Plotkin 2011). A different presentation style in which all affordances were explicitly reported to the player might erode much of this challenge and pleasure. Addressing this problem requires either a better way of teaching players how to interact with the parser, developing for novice users the same set of expectations of genre and possibility that expert

players already rely on, or a more fundamental re-envisioning of how one might interact with a modeled textual world.

HIGH-TECH AND LOW-TECH ADVANCES

Development systems for interactive fiction have advanced in new and unusual ways. The latest version of Graham Nelson's Inform, the most widely-used system in the core community, is called Inform 7 and allows programming in a syntax and typography based on natural language. While programmers still have to understand how the system works in order to write games in it, the source code for games is legible to anyone and reads like English text. A research system, Nick Montfort's *Curveship*, was released in February 2011. It offers the ability to parametrically control how actions are represented and how items are described, so that the programmer can not only model the simulated, fictional world but also control how its story is told to the player.

Web-based "Choose-Your-Own-Adventure"-style games have been around for a while and even had their own competition in the IF community, the 2001 LOTECH Comp. Systems for programming these, such as Jon Ingold's *Adventure Book*, have been available for a while. But these sorts of games are gaining new prominence thanks to new authoring systems: Undum by I. D. Millington, inklewriter by inkle studios, and ChoiceScript by the Choice of Games company. Their easy use on mobile phones and other portable devices appeals to authors wanting to reach a wider audience. A related direction is the addition to tradition interactive fiction of keywords that function a bit like hypertext links. *Blue Lacuna*, *Walker and Silhouette*, and *A Colder Light* feature this mode of interaction, and Inform extensions now allow any author to easily support this play style.

REDEFINING IF, REDEFINING THE COMMUNITY (2011-)

In recent years the term "interactive fiction" has been heavily adopted by groups outside the IF community discussed in this article, and new sets of tools have led to ever larger numbers of works that present themselves differently from conventional parser-based interactive fiction. As a result, that community has been challenged to define both its own identity and the nature of the work it understands as IF.

Part of this change is a reaction to the increasing number of independent video games that emphasize story more than, or instead of, more traditional

gameplay mechanics. Criticisms of graphical games such as *Dear Esther* (2008), *The Stanley Parable* (2011), *Kentucky Route Zero* (2013-4) and *Gone Home* (2013) often refer to these works as interactive fiction.

Meanwhile, as several members of the traditional IF community have pursued commercial opportunities more seriously, they have had a strong incentive to reconsider what they do and present it in a new light for a larger audience. The period 2011-2014 has seen significant success for both Choice of Games and inkle studios, creating choice-based interactive works written, in many cases, by authors who started out writing parser IF.

Finally, hypertextual interactive fiction, and particularly that created used the Twine platform, has come into prominence, with *howling dogs*, by Porpentine, winning XYZZY Awards in the Best Story and Best Writing categories in 2012 and receiving substantial reviewer attention. Twine has been used to create many experimental interactive fictions, including several that deal with issues of identity and radical alienation. Twine has been celebrated as giving voice to new perspectives by Anna Anthropy, the author of *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*. Recent Twine authors, with different thematic concerns and different ways of engaging the digital medium, have now joined others who are developing interactive fiction of different sorts. Twine 2, which can be created as well as read/played in a browser, is currently in beta.

These changes have challenged the community's institutions and traditions. Both curating and archiving the broader range of games has proven challenging. In 2013, for the first time, choice-based works outnumbered parser-based works in the annual IF Competition. Commercial IF is nominated alongside amateur work for the XYZZY Awards. Large groups of voters from the Choice of Games community forum have voted en masse in community events, tipping the scales in favor of ChoiceScript work. At the same time, alternative hosting sites such as philome.la for Twine games mean that there is less incentive even for those Twine creators who self-identify as IF authors to submit their work to the IF Archive. The Oxford-London Interactive Fiction Meetup, started in 2014, drew over thirty attendees to its initial meeting, of whom fewer than a third were interested primarily in parser-based IF.

For the most part, IF community institutions have avoided attempting to define IF exclusively and instead have taken an opt-in approach to interactive fiction events. Anything that is submitted to the IF Comp (subject to rules about prior

release and copyright infringement) is eligible to win that competition. Anything listed on IFDB for a given year is eligible for the year's XYZZY Awards. Bloggers who wish to be included in Planet-IF's aggregation generally are included, whether or not their primary focus is parser-based or even Twine-based interactive fiction. The mood of individual judges and reviewers has not been quite so unanimous, of course; there are a nontrivial number of participants who still consider parser-based work to be their main interest, and who reflect that in their reviewing and scoring strategies.

Nonetheless, the growth and diversification of IF requires constant development and reconsideration of both technology and institutions.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the years, many factors have come together to foster community around interactive fiction. People have been willing to distribute their work freely, and it has been easy to do so at practically no cost online. The stability of and access to early platforms has allowed people to play games through several decades. At the same time, technological innovation has continued, bringing new capabilities. Essentially, those interested in interactive fiction have found that their activities are supported by individuals who devote their time not only to making games and playing them but also to developing the resources for conversation, distribution of work, and other forms of community-building. The current movement toward community-built sites (such as the IFDB and ifwiki) involved individual initiative in their founding, but also welcomes the broader participation of the community in contributing and editing.

The IF community has been very successful in advancing the state of the art, getting interactive fiction to the core interested group of players, fostering reviews and discussion of IF, and reaching out to gamers. The format has even been picked up for use in various educational settings. The community's success has perhaps been most limited in connecting with literary and writerly communities. Although a few IF games have been published in online literary magazines or reviewed in them, there is still little representation of interactive fiction in e-lit circles and less awareness in mainstream fiction communities. The community around interactive fiction will hopefully hold some lessons for other electronic literature communities; perhaps the IF community can also learn from other e-lit

communities and find a stronger connection to the writing world, building upon its other successes.

THE FLASH COMMUNITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR POST-CONCEPTUALISM

BY DONNA LEISHMAN

Complimenting a broader international research paradigm shift, Electronic Literature scholars and practitioners alike have expressed a desire to expand the field to include deep collaborations with other disciplines. In achieving such a goal any original indigenous ideologies and aesthetics may be challenged. This dialectical tension between striving to be niche/identifiable/original in a mixed discipline economy faced with contemporary descriptors of 'human experience' such as Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* (2000), Paola Antonelli's "elasticity" (2008) or even Sherry Turkle's "life mix" (2011) remains key to facing this challenge.

Using interviews, emergent theories, and archival resources, this chapter argues that the Flash community has already faced the issue of contemporary homogeneity driven by our on-going context of rapid technological change and can be regarded as an exemplar of post-conceptual experimentalism. After a comparative analysis between the Flash Community (FC) and Electronic Literature, the paper goes on to explore other new insights and considers the implications of being post-conceptual as a future opportunity and/or risk for Electronic Literature.

SUMMARY

The Flash community was born digital from a predominantly commercial worldview opposed to electronic literature, which has arguably always straddled its conceptual tradition and its digitalism. Both communities investigated programming and used the Internet to help produce experimental creative outcomes. Chronistic differences become interesting around the millennium with Flash's focus on neo-geometric creative programming (Lev Manovich 2002) vs. the boom in multi-media experimentation within electronic literature (Mark Amerika et al. 2001-2) both cultures seemingly reached into new territories and not without criticism.[49] This chapter will chart the formative moments within the Flash com-

49 FC criticism: "The rules are: no Flash, no introduction pages, no more art for the sake of error, images must be unique to the site-maker, technology and the Internet are not subjects, and the work stands alone" (Eric Salvaggio, 2002).

munity up to present day and finally will present issues relevant to the electronic literature community.

INTRODUCTION | THE VALUE OF COMMUNITY

Today's torrent of societal change fostered by a digitally networked reality creates a new circumstance whereby we "...routinely live at different scales, in different contexts, and at different settings—Default, Phone-only, Avatar On, Everything Off on a number of screens, each with its own size, interface, and resolution, and across several time zones" (Antonelli 2008, 15). This reality has effected many corporate identities (consider the state of journalism, publishing, music distribution, and retail) and deeply challenged the production and distribution market mechanisms. The speed and volume of change can no longer be termed a new or temporary circumstance ("liquid modernity" was proposed by Bauman back in 2000). Alongside this moving societal context a broader international research paradigm shift has occurred which sees Humanities seeking collaboration with the empirical sciences. Electronic literature scholars and practitioners alike have expressed a desire to expand the field to include deep collaborations with other disciplines.[50] In achieving such a goal, the established ideologies and aesthetics may be eroded or even lost. The issue of identifying and establishing genre features and methods still remain an important activity in sustaining community identity and rigor especially in multidisciplinary methodologies.

Within this chapter I will focus on defining the Flash Community's framework and its usefulness (or not) for electronic literature (e-lit) and for the sake of expediency leave defining the e-lit framework to the HERA funded ELMCIP project, a project that specifically explores how the e-lit communities have evolved in recent decades.[51] This chapter will also explore in detail the history of the Flash Community (FC) from the proposition that it is an important online community to review because of its particular born digital nature, its community evolution and lastly its cultural impact in terms of audience and economic value, both of which can arguably be regarded as second only to the online gaming sector.

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50 A topic of much debate at the Electronic Literature Organization, Visionary Landscapes conference, Washington State University Vancouver in 2008.

51 Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice was a 3-year collaborative research project running from 2010-2013, funded by the Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) JRP for Creativity and Innovation.

INTRODUCTION | FLASH

Since the arrival of the computer as creative tool with *Spacewar* in 1961 (Russell et al.) ever-expanding worlds of imaginative creators have adapted technologies to their own needs. In the early days of Internet culture, these blooming communities centered very clearly on software technologies: IRC, MUDS, ASCII, HTML, Flash and StorySpace, though conceptually, they communicated a multitude of different concerns.[52]

Digital mediated communities also present a challenge to existing documentary and archival practices. The poetics of new media places emphasis on temporal (and in these cases) online interactions. Much of the material around the FC is inaccessible, almost invisible to those out with the community, and documentation of the development of the community is particularly scant, spread over various forums, blogs and websites, punctuated by key gatherings and differing archival perspectives. Traces of the Flash culture from the turn of the century, predating a serious digital archival practice, now remain mostly in memory. The paper will discuss new research, primarily using interviews as a form of oral history (Muller 2008) to better reveal the internal developments and events that helped to form and feed the FC.

PREHISTORIC HISTORY: THE MID-NINETIES

The notion of where to cite the origins of *any* digital community is contentious; does one define the beginning as the first use of a tool, or the first public experience of new discrete practice, or the emergence of a defined new philosophy or ideology? This chapter takes the liberty of beginning with practitioners—John Maeda and Golan Levin (fig. 1) who are regarded by the FC itself as pioneers of creative programming with their artistic work using Java Applets in the mid-nineties. John Maeda, as founder of the M.I.T-based *Aesthetics and Computation* Group, is particularly interesting. His group was a prototype of the technology/art collective that we see emulated within the history of the FC. Maeda's group also gave life to the influential *Processing.org* library (2001), which has helped to

52 Selection of technologies: IRC (Internet Relay Chat), MUDS (Multi-Useli Dungeon, with later variants Multi-User Dimension and Multi-User Domain), ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange), HTML (HyperText Markup Language), Macromedia Flash, StorySpace (A hypertext writing environment from Eastgate.com).

make programming more accessible to electronic artists. Levin, an alumnus of this group, went on to setup *Singlecell.org* (2001-2) another diverse online gathering of computational artists and designers who explored programming to visualize natural behaviors. Both Maeda and Levin now position themselves as critical practitioners of software art and span the fields of audio, visual, design, and art research (Maeda).

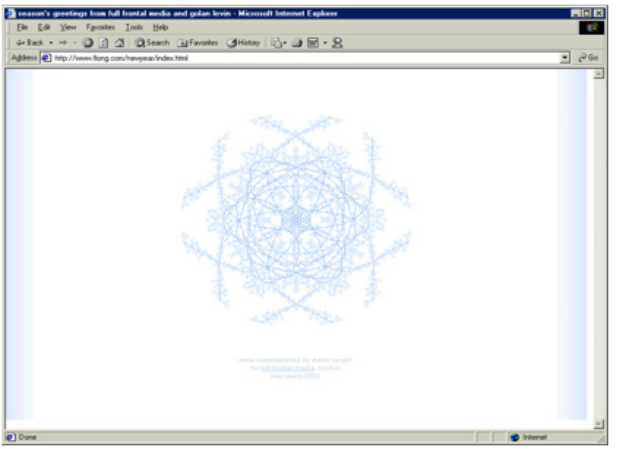

Fig. 1 Flong by Golan Levin 2002, Snowflake generator java applet.

In 1996, whilst Levin and Maeda where exploring Java Applets, Macromedia Flash was introduced (Adobe took it over in 2005). As a multimedia technology it was initially developed to allow interactivity and animation to stream over limited 56k "dial-up" Internet via its vector based (opposed to Bitmap) drawing and animation toolbox. As a secondary feature, Flash contained its own simple programming language Actionscript. In this prehistoric period technical limitations were a major driver: Flash 3 (circa 1996) was a tool very much orientated to a timeline (not to programming), early users had to devise workarounds in the same way that the hyperlink was a forced constraint/limitation in early e-lit works.[53]

53 An example of this would be using a laborious timeline frame workaround in score counting for games, i.e. go frame 1, 2, 3, 4 because Actionscript could not support variables via building a function. Making a virtue out of a limitation: the experimentation and investigation of Ted Nelson's (1965) hyper-ness as the non-linear organization of content, and the implication of interconnectedness has consumed conceptually many electronic literature practitioners (Stuart Moulthrop and Eastgate.com). The "hyperlink" was thrown into contrast by the emergence of Cybertext and the notion of ergodic literature by Espen Aarseth (1997).

STONE AGE: Y2K

Four years later, at the turn of the millennium, the FC began to gain cultural momentum, and the community displayed early characteristics of today's liquid condition of routinely living and connecting with different contexts over multiple time zones. Most members were resolutely working within the Dotcom bubble as programmers and web-designers. From the outset (unlike e-lit) there were at least two distinct subgroups of people within the community, the makers and the contentious "fan boys," a term that we will visit in following sections and explore further.[54] The Flash makers were made up of a broad, complex, international group of "artists, developers, poets, geeks, punks, and freaks" (Davis 2001) who were initially connected by the forum Dreamless.org, a community discussion board managed by Davis and one of the FC's most divisive and visible artist/designer/technologist hybrid characters. In terms of his community impact, Davis was also a major exponent with his personal projects Once-upon-a-forest.com and Praystation.com both of which had significant audience interest. Davis's Once-upon-a-forest project at its zenith had a new iteration launched every week.

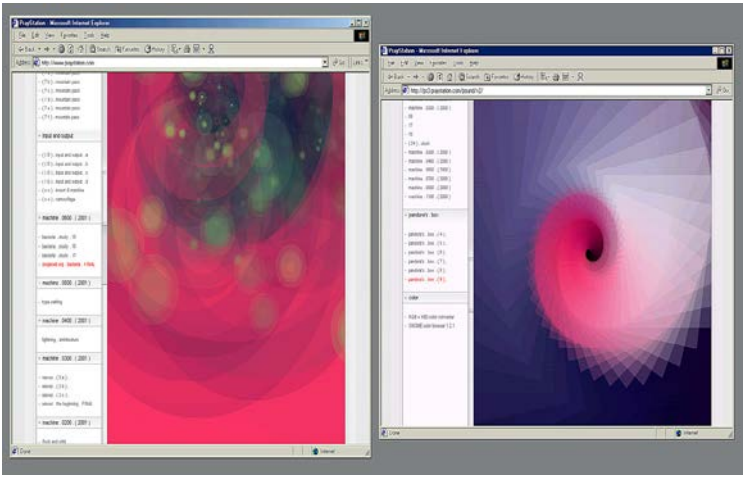

Fig. 2 Praystation by Joshua Davis ca. 2004.

54 I'm intentionally using a term "maker" as it is a term well associated with craft, this captures the intense primary connection with the (digital) material as method to generate concept.

The other ties that bound this new community were the need to express personal (i.e., non-client orientated) ideas free from the responsibilities of good usability. Davis described Praystation as:

> …the nemesis of what we perceive the web to be. No easy, short domain name. No easy to use navigation. No instructions. No Faqs. No ads. No links. No technical support. No help. No answers. A digital black hole where a character I have created amuses himself to death. Where questions are provoked but never answered…(Walters 2001).

Similar to what was happening within e-lit, the networked connectivity of the Internet was instrumental in fostering a particular state of creative mind. For Flash, it provided a simultaneously discursive and practical open sharing of ideas and code. Participants in both communities were, in principle, free from geographic politics and/or the traditional logistics of production and distribution. Within the FC there was a very close direct communication centered mainly on each other's personal projects. Direct communication came in the form of daily conversations held using early forms of Internet chat such as ICQ and MSN messenger.[55] These long fractured and often multiple conversations were often run simultaneously alongside the day job (fig. 3 for an example of multi-tasking).

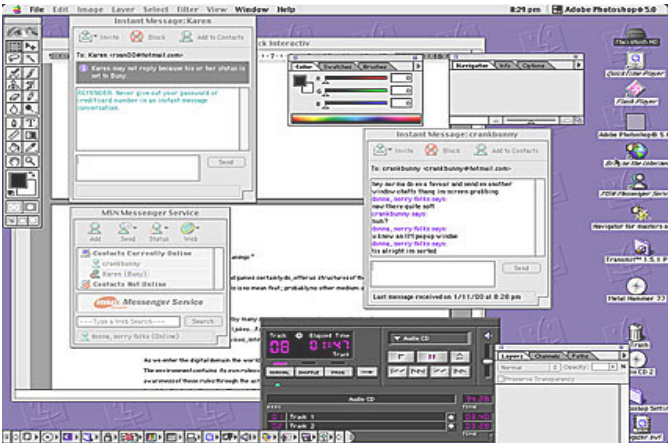

Fig. 3 My Apple Macintosh desk layout from September 1999, a typical multi-tasking environment.

55 Hoss Gifford (2011) a Scottish maker and cited Master of Flash, connected with the European team from NMUF.org in London's Flashforward and continued working with them via ICQ.

The creative potential and sense of freedom to develop projects (without the corporate client) was enticing; the fact that there were likeminded connectable (via the ICQ or private forums) peers was "intoxicating" (Hoss Gifford 2011). There was a friendly competition to "do better" and remote networked creative remixing of works facilitated by the Dreamless forum was common.

This group quickly naturalized the internationalism of the Internet, with key committed community members being physically based in North America, Japan, and Europe.[56] The participants' list in Singlecell.org is an example of this spread (US/UK/NO/AT/FI). The Stone Age period of the FC, with this deep connection and work collaboration, could be remotely regarded as a precursor to the connectivity of today's social media.[57]

The majority came to the FC from a programming/systems perspective rather than any creative design background; print designers were for the most part hands off in terms of the code. Implied in Davis' quote describing the Dreamless, ethos is the democratization or freedom within the forum—the lack of formal design education did not hinder or block anyone. Another aspect to this community was the ability to upload work on the Internet without any conceivable sanction. Being free from any client direction, everyone could make anything. For the FC community this represented a particular form for release given that most people were constrained by clients or their Art Directors. In addition, the palpable, swelling audience for these personal projects evidenced by community members adding each other to their link sections on websites, user hit counters, online zines, and forums soon created a scenario in which the personal projects rather than the job could better satisfy or fulfill the ego.

BRONZE AGE: COMMODITY IN THE FLASH COMMUNITY

The community attracted or developed a hierarchy. An example of this is K10K (Kaliber10000) or The Designer's Lunchbox, a non-commercial proto design blog that launched in 1998. Its unique selling point was that a new issue came out every week and the content was updated hourly with global design news. Like

56 Key committed community members being physically based in North America (natzke.com, weworkforthem.com, prate.com), Japan (yugop.com) and Belgium/France (chman.com, banja.com, rolitoland.com, vectorlounge.net).

57 "[Facebook] keeps users in a neurotic limbo, not knowing whether they should hang on in there just in case they miss out on something good" (Kathy Charles, 2011).

Dreamless it was highly influential in sharing activity and news. Unlike Dreamless, which was a more interior forum, K10K had very exterior facing style and trend orientated agenda. The founders Toke Nygaard and Michael Schmidt from the US design agency Cubancouncil.com had a particular editorial bent (aiming to inspire designers and "design minded developers"). K10K was also divisive with some users, claiming it was part of an emerging "over designed" trend and that it was all but incestuous eye candy for the FC.

Around this period the three *New Masters of Flash* books were published by Friends of Ed (2001-3) and the Flashforward conferences were launched by Lynda Weinman and Stewart McBride. The first Flashforward was held in New York in 1999 and charged a very telling (corporate) entrance fee of $995. The second Flashforward conference held in London in November 2000 (fig. 4) was particularly seminal in that it brought physically together the international, non-North American FC maker group.[58] Alongside the main Flashforward, London festival NMUF.org organized (via Dreamless) an underground event (fig. 5), which called upon the Flashforward speakers to present for free. The result was

Fig. 4 and 5 Flashforward 2000, London. The fee-paying audience. Courtesy of Phillip Kerman

58 James Paterson met his long-term collaborator Amit Pitaru at the conference—only to discover that they lived in the same Brooklyn Street (Gifford 2011).

an informal but maker led pre-conference. Attendee Jake Nickell who won the NMUF t-shirt design competition used his winnings ($1000) as seed money to co-found Threadless.org, which is now a hugely successful crowd sourced t-shirt design community who have now sold more than 4 million tees since 2000.

One of the largest difference between e-lit and the FC is in the audience size. Almost from the outset the FC contained a layered community, the expert makers as experimenters, and the "fan boys" (vernacular definition being a passionate fan of geek culture). These fan boys, many of who were employed in the peaking new media industry as programmers, can be regarded as additional drivers in propelling the community and as such are perhaps ill served by the somewhat derogatory term. It's a common fallacy that the makers were ideologically open source. Apart from Davis who copied and sold his Praystation hard drive, most of the master makers did not actively share their code to community and or public.[59] Rather there was a fast cycle of deconstruction and reverse engineering of the makers new experimental projects by these fan boys, for example Yugop's Nervous Matrix. A 3x3 grid project (fig. 6) was remade and shared within the week after it was launched by fans.

Fig. 6 Nervous Matrix by Yugop 2002, Actionscript.

59 Eastgate Systems also sold Praystation's limited edition Hard-disk at http://www.eastgate.com/catalog/Praystation.html (2002).

These fan boys would be better described as graded line cooks to the maker as chef, a symbiotic not separate system. After all it was their work in stripping down and working out the code of the creative projects which propagated the high volume of code swapping and sharing within the levels of the FC, again predating the emergence of today's ubiquitous file swapping. This practice of reverse engineering had little if no deleterious effects—the appreciation of the makers craft enlarged from novice Flash makers who were stimulated by meddling with the code inside inspirational projects. Like the Threadless t-shirt design community this activity unexpectedly started the formal FC tutorial/support websites, which were for the most part both highly educational and free.[60]

IRON AGE: THE LIGHTNESS OF FLASH

The FC's Iron Age occurs in the stormy period between the dotcom bubble popping around 2001, and the lull before the larger financial crisis of 2007. To recap the various systems of commoditization that had fell into place, the remote networked nature of the makers and fan boys had been given a physical structure via the numerous festivals and conferences and more mainstream cultural visibility was achieved via the various books in publication and international exhibitions. With the release of Flash MX and Actionscript 2.0 in 2004, the programming characteristic of the community really took hold. James Tindall, Jared Tarbell (fig. 7), Geoff Stearns, Erik Natzke, Robert Hodgin, Lia and Joshua Davis were all major makers contributing to the programmatic aesthetic; the visual outcomes were categorized as a new form of "neo-minimalism" by Manovich.

Predating this and almost entirely rejected by the FC was the aesthetics of the technology. The aesthetics of the technology was typically a preoccupation with the mechanical digital, cyborg and the post-human, a prosaic use of circuit boards (as a metaphor of connectivity and all things computerized) and the appropriation of the syntax of programming. Its usage was common with general Internet cultures and within e-lit.[61] Manovich's essay "Generation Flash, Postscript: On The Lightness of Flash" highlighted the emergence of this new

60 Examples of the educational tutorial sub-community: actionscript.org, flashkit.com, kirupa.com, moock.org/webdesign/flash/predating the uploading of tutorial videos on YouTube.

61 Examples of aesthetics of the technology: Mark Amerika's *Film Text 2.0*, and Mez (Mary-Anne Breeze), *_the data][h!][bleeding texts_*.

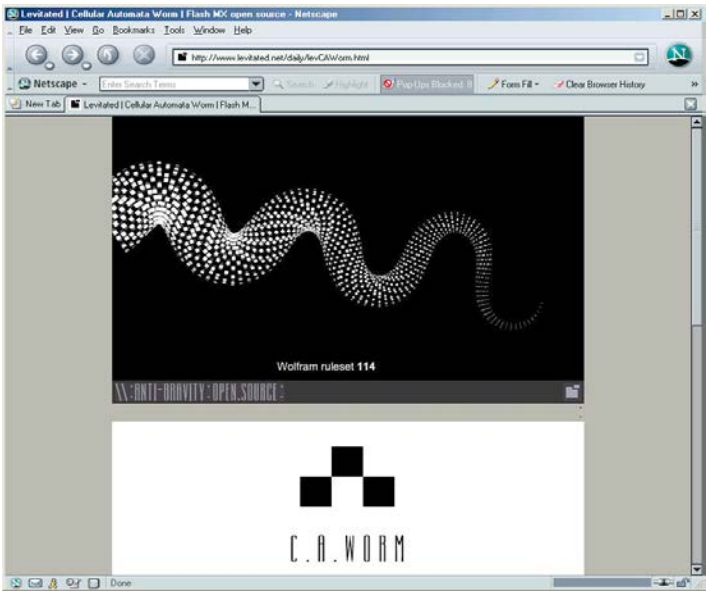

Fig. 7 C.A. Worm by Levitated/Jeremy Tarbell. 2004. Actionscript 2.0

visual and filmic aesthetic within FC. Manovich eclectically cites 1960s minimalist sculptures and ambient electronica as referents. I would also argue that more recent design trends such as the Swiss Style of graphic design or the European (Danish) design influence of K10K were also formative as they were directly part of the real-time visual FC world. Manovich, in his postscript also suggests that this aesthetic was an intentional cleansing of postmodernism, a move towards a rational science frame to escape the previous visual clichés and theories of postmodernism. As mentioned earlier the contextual or intellectual basis of the FC is incredibly hard to evidence between the lack of published critical discussion and is perhaps part evidenced by Levin's statement, "I don't really give much consideration to categories like "art," "design," "performance," and "science." These boxes may be helpful for making sense of the past, but not necessarily for anticipating the future" (Levin 2009). The FC, for the most part, seemed post-conceptual, where makers were by their own free will removed from a socio-political context.

THE EMERGENCE OF (ANTI) IDEOLOGIES: 2005

Considering the spans of other cultural histories, over a microscopic nine years (1996-2005) the FC had arguably now defined itself as a technological rather than content driven practice, a convergence opposed to electronic literature's (prob-

lematic for some) multi-media divergence in the same period. The FC's creative freedom or cultural value peaked when new personal projects were sponsored by brands attempting to co-associate (e.g. fashion label Diesel had a new media gallery and Sony developed Thethirdplace.com, indie UK publishing house Canongate commissioned AptStudio.com to produce a series of new media promos).[62] The allegation that the FC was all style, no substance, and without content wasn't entirely untrue, but what is implied is that is a bad thing. What was also clear was that the FC seems to be without the traditional cultural grounding. At the time I found it intriguing that famous personas from the print-based Design world or mainstream culture seemed to be held in lower esteem by this group. At the first Flashforward conference in NYC (FF2K), when Run DMC was hired to perform at the conference after party, the audience's response was a mix of nonchalance and bemusement. A similar response was given to David Carson (often cited as the most influential graphic designer of the nineties) who keynoted for Flash In the Can, the Canadian version of Flashforward in 2005; I observed Carson was left to stand alone at the after party. I initially thought it evidence of the FC's bravado or the FC's extremely insular worldview, but now suspect it was another indicator of the born digital absenteeism in terms of popular design culture, whereas the e-lit community tends to be contextually aware of their literary/poetic precedents and as such can often display (within their works) a sophisticated self-reflexive mode of inquiry.

I have always felt that all Internet-sustained communities were defined by their lack of stable descriptors and that genre agility was native. The sustained deep commitment to the programming and technical aspect of Flash seems like an early creative process of entwining. Lucy Suchman, an anthropologist specializing in the digital, recently stated:

> ...relations of human practice and technical artifact [have] become ever more layered and intertwined. At the same time that the technological project is one of congealing and objectifying human activities; it is increasingly also one of animating and finding subjectivity in technical artifacts. The assimilation of lived experience to technique goes both ways, which only makes the project of re-imagining technological objects the more urgent (Suchman 2010).

62 Yann Martell's *Life of Pi*, and Douglas Coupland's *Hey, Nostradamus* and *The Bagdad Blogger* were all re-imagined as interactive screen artworks by Apt Studio.

The allegation that the FC was problematically without content was perhaps immature: looking retrospectively the impact of the formal interest in the experimentation for its own end has led to an economic trail. [63]

INTERSECTIONS: NARRATIVE AND GENERATIVE ART

As far back as the first *Flashforward* conference in 1999, Josh Ulm from *Ioresearch* explicitly considered and spoke about the implications of digital media for narrative:

> Storytelling is fundamental to society, culture, and communication. Narrative is the basic structure by which we share our ideas and experiences. As we begin to use the Internet to tell stories, the narratives we communicate will have the benefit of interactivity, programmatic behaviours, non-linearity, and physidigital space and multi-user environments-aspects that traditional media has (sic) never truly understood (Ulm 1999).

Josh Ulm was also the curator of The Remedi Project (1997-2002), an online portal that had twelve online exhibitions based on experimental work from over sixty digital artists from around the world; many of these works were narratives, representational and deeply considered their networked nature and as such were quite counter to the Manovich's "Unbearable Lightness of FLASH." Bornmagazine.org (1997–present), founded by Gabe Kean of Secondstory.com, is another long established hub that still specializes in partnering interactive artists from the Flash and Net Art communities with poets or writers (fig. 8).[64] New collaborative projects are launched on *Born Magazine* every three months.

Another FC narrative producer is the UK design agency Hi-Res!.net and their alter ego SoulBath.org (fig. 9). Hi-Res! carved a very particular niche that was both client-led and conceptually experimental. Their work is a complex hy-

63 Evidence of Flash's economic trail can be traced through multiple threads, the revenue from the conferences, the publishing industry (Snow Dowd's *Macromedia Flash Bible* and the New Masters of Flash series), the start up companies: Hogkin's Cinder app, Internet host Mediatemple and the involvement of FC makers in big digital businesses such as Jared Tarbell/Etsy, Nickells/Threadless and the Jeff Stearn in Youtube. Veronique Brossier for Cartoon Network.

64 BornMag's creatives circa 2002-4: Erik Natzke, Michael Cina James Paterson, NosePilot, ChoppingBlock, Motomichi Nakamura, Niko Stumpo, Nathan Jurevicius, Matt Owens, MilkyElephant, Hillman Curtis. Also working in narrative opposed to pure neo-minimalism for Flash was Robert Hodgin and The CodexSeries 1-3 were curated and maintained by Matt Owens. The website and associated CD-ROMs are a collection of digital works addressing in individual terms an exploration into narrative design.

brid of film, motion-graphics, novel, game play, and design. This is exemplified in their early cross media interpretation of Darren Aronofsky's film *Requiem for a Dream*.

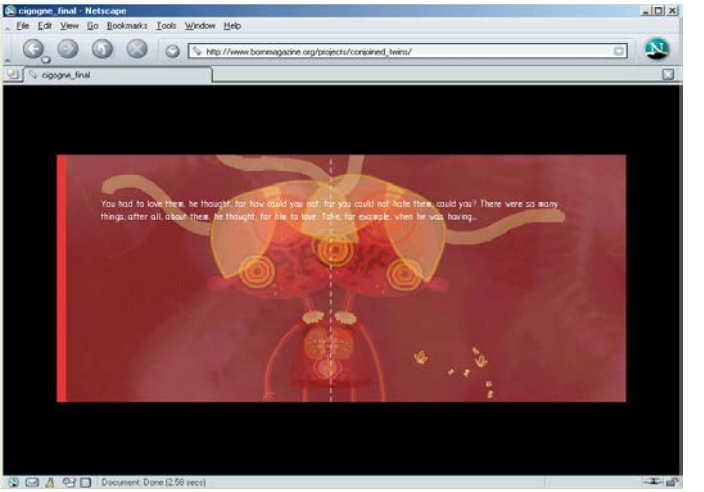

Fig. 8 C is for Conjoined Twins by Susannah Breslin and Rolito from Rolitoland.com 2004.

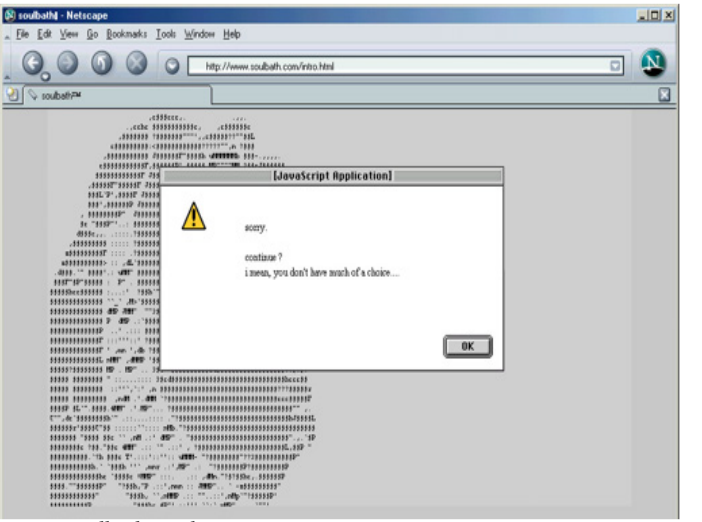

Fig. 9. Soulbath.org by Hires! 2000.

E-LIT AND GENERATIVE PROCESSES

Just as the FC has narrative moments, generative and database processes have also been used in e-lit works. "Babel" (Simon Biggs 2001), "Talking Cure" (Noah Wardrip-Fruin, et al. 2002), "The Last Performance.org" (Judd Morrissey 2007-10), "Wordscapes" (Peter Cho 2008), and "Poemas no meio do caminho" (Rui Torres 2009) can all be seen to represent a deep authorial investigation into Processing, database programming, and visualization algorithms as methods to extend the scope of the reader's interactions. This said, difference still remains—Morrissey's, Cho's, and Torres's projects use language and interaction semantically, i.e., it as allied to a conceptual purpose, whereas the FC can be regarded as a form of continuous examination of function (Yugop's "Amaztype Zeitgeist"). These moments of intersection can be regarded as a "digital blur" (Rodgers 2010), an overlap of interests happening ostensibly at the fringes or niches within each community. When the FC was exploring the programming capacities of ActionScript (1996-2006), e-lit and was deep in their consideration of the hyperlinked structure, cybertexts, and the debates of differentiation between Ludology and Net Art. E-lit became absorbed in complex computing later than both the Flash and media art communities (Biggs and Wardrip-Fruin are exceptions), and it could be argued that the very conceptual tradition of e-lit makes any significant cultural or technological change likely to have creative impact or at least be of interest to the community. Simply put, perhaps e-lit, given its focus on conceptual practice, cannot escape the near histories of its community neighbors?

THE PRESENT | THE RIGHT TO CHILDREN

Having considered the key historical movements, tensions, and the various sub communities or hubs that orbited around the larger entity that is the FC (Dreamless, Singlecell, The Remedi Project, BornMag, K10K, Flashkit et al.) this chapter will now consider the present. Five years ago, the risk was that Flash would disappear. Macromedia and the current owners, Adobe, have worked very hard at making the Flash player and Actionscript 2.0/3.0 (2006) indispensable; they were proactive and consulted with key members of the FC to build "desirable" release features. Flash has had significant success with streaming video, so much so it is now the default viewing player for YouTube with one billion unique users visiting each month, and it poised to make major in-roads into becoming a 3-D player

and extending its reach into the online gaming market (Gifford). From its origins as a vector based animation tool, it has become a robust programming option and video player. However the FC today has been media homogenized, reviewing the current large audiences at Flash conferences such as FITC and Flash on the Beach, these conferences now cover a plethora of digital production fields: motion and video graphics, gaming, mobile technologies, HTML5, and film as well as Flash. Many of the original makers, such as Hodgin, Casey Reas, Mr Doobs and Gifford are now exploring Processing (Java) and openFrameworks (C++) and have moved almost entirely away from Flash as a tool, so the name Flash as a description of this community (if we follow the people) no longer seems appropriate. If the tool defines the FC then the community has extended its borders to such an extent that it now encompasses all the major digital production spheres (sound perhaps being the only exception at the moment). Mapping the initial maker group and looking for any migration it is clear that the majority have remained in their initial dualism between doing both corporate and personal projects—with many founding their own digital media agencies and companies.[65] This sustained ability for the FC to generate new companies, or the makers to be placed at the helm of major digital agencies, is distinctive.[66]

This chapter has only sketched (in the broadest lines) the history of the FC, but even such a sketch contains interesting anomalies, features, and points of interest for e-lit. What leaps out is that the FC was heavily populated by unconventional creatives who were neither educated formally nor aware/concerned with the broader socio-political conceptual landscape. E-lit makers are typically academically orientated (theory, comparative studies, poetics) and often are educated (at least) at graduate level. The correlation of e-lit authors either as alumni

65 Notable Maker migrations between 2000-5 to 2011: John Maeda, then MIT media lab, now Academic (ex-principle of RMIT), Daniel Brown, then working for Showstudio now freelance consultant and artist. Erik Natzke, then designer at Forum, now working for Method and freelance. Prate (Jemma Gura), freelance designer/art director, now has her company SansNom. Mike Cina, then founder of Wework for them, now own company Cinaart, Jared Tarbell, then freelance developer now Partner in Etsy, James Paterson, then Insertsilence, now Technical Director in an agency. Joshua Davis, then freelance Praystation, now Academic at Pratt and freelance artist. Marcos Wescamp then, Razorfish now owner Flipboard iphone App, Gmunk (Bradley Munkowitz), then Freelance designer, now Motion graphics director–recent Tron remake. Hillman Curtis, freelance designer, now filmmaker.

66 Jared Tarbell with Etsy, Robert Hodgin was a co-owner of the Barbarian group and designed Cinder a peer-reviewed, free, open source C++ library for creative coding.

or appointed faculty of universities (Brown, Bergen, De Montfort, M.I.T, Carnegie Mellon et al.) is, I suggest, a defining characteristic in itself for e-lit as is the corporate nature for the FC.[67] The FC's first decade was dominated by extremely driven individuals who put in thousands of hours of work into their personal projects and without (for the most part) any material support whilst maintaining client web work. Some of the expert makers such as Hodgin or Yugop even recycled their experiments back into client designs and vice versa for Hi-Res! whose experimental alter ego Soulbath.org website won them the attention of the director Aronofsky. E-lit has yet to significantly cross-pollinate personal practice with the commercial sector.[68] The FC's audience draw being both an industrial and experimental community was interestingly large, even the homogenized contemporary Flash conference circuit still generates 500-1000 paying attendees a time whereas e-lit remain relatively niche. The integration or involvement of the corporate sector within the FC is also particular, very few FC members have evolved like Daniel Brown (noodlebox.com) into media art as a full-time vocation, most continue to straddle and manage personal and work responsibilities. The experimentation and community-sharing ethos that was fostered by Flash triggered for many makers and fan boys a deep commitment with creative technologies, the fruits of which have proven to be very impactful via the entrepreneurial and leadership qualities of the makers.

QUESTIONS

Was Flash helped by its own post-conceptual default? Were the outcomes more inviting for audiences, as often no prior knowledge of any kind was needed to experience these artifacts? Where the delight and pleasure was in the moment, a new abstract experience, an insight into the code would be a bonus but not a deal breaking in terms of engagement. The FC should be viewed under the light of science paradigm, perhaps via digital humanities, but not through the lens of traditional humanities, for many FC members Levin's comment about a fundamental disinterest in categorization highlights that the FC were fully adjusted to the life

67 One could argue that academia is a similar model for e-lit with the cycle of learning and reuse coming from academic research, which is taken back into teaching and some new practice.

68 The publisher Penguin's collaborative writing experiment *A Million Penguins* with De Montfort University in 2007 a notable exception.

of liquidity where fractured timelines were normal, where social structures were no longer stable, and a state of being where fixed concepts like "career" could no longer be meaningfully applied, what was valued was progress, the FC evidenced a continuous examination of configuration and function. Fifteen years of digital convergence and movement of knowledge and expertise has made the makers and fan boys well placed for the unknown future. This could be the most valuable community output as Jim Boulton (2010) posits a future where we may no longer have websites, where discrete portals built around brands will no longer hold any value, his prediction is also mirrored by the growing interest in combining mobile devices and "cloud computing" (virtual servers on the Internet) as a way to even more dynamically scale and deliver content.[69]

The structured creativity of the FC seemed like an important driver in generating innovation (Hogkin and Bell 2010, 16). Without the pressure of the client work what would have happened? As a place for collaboration FC is a strong yet nimble set of working practices made the FC a light community indeed. The conceptual nature of e-lit makers places the e-lit community at the other end of that spectrum. The frequency of the commitment within the FC a community was also important with many new iterations of significant work being uploaded weekly (Praystation, Once-upon-a-forest) or monthly (*Born Magazine*, The Remedi Project, Singlecell). This impetus to constantly re-invent and or create, especially in a reality where things move precariously fast and time is precious is a way to circumvent stagnation, or member disconnection. One thing seems constant: the worlds of imaginative creators are (still) expanding, and adapting technologies to their own needs. So perhaps naturally the FC are no longer staying put with their technology and are migrating onwards into C++ and WebGL (an extension of JavaScript).

Toke Nygaard talking to the Digital Archaeology project in 2010 about K10K reinforces the Levin mindset regarding fixed knowledge:

> ... a lot of experiments, a lot of hard work brought us to where we are right now, I feel like the whole time, back then (1998) and I still feel like that, that there was a sense that, ya we made its, like this is IT, this is the Internet, I feel like that is a completely weird way to see it, I constantly feel like we are just started, even now I feel like . . . [pause] people who just sit back with their SEO knowledge and their nonsense . . . it like we

69 The Digital Archaeology (2010) project curator Jim Boulton speculates that website will no longer exist in 5 years time.

> just started, tomorrow what your doing right now is totally obsolete.[70] (Nygaard 2010)

CONCLUSION

Macromedia/Adobe's Flash was more than just a piece of production software. Like e-lit, it fostered an international community complete with indigenous ideologies, tension points, and aesthetics. The FC was ultimately less about a shared platform and more about a set of creative concerns: an agile passion for creative programming, a place to be conceptually "light," a community as laboratory with two entrance/exit doors (personal and corporate). It was for many the fertile beginning of obsessive relationship with creative computing, and deep networked connection with other makers across the world, but now a tentative fifteen years after its launch the defining makers have migrated away from Flash and the defining minimal aesthetic and characteristics have been all but consumed by the digital deluge, the name Flash community now means something else far less tangible. *HiRes!'s* founder Alexandra Jugovic also makes mention of the digital ages threat of oblivion and notes that everyone's methods are challenged to keep pace. In this sense, the FC could also be considered as an omen, a possible example of the dangers (or strength depending on ones position) in fully embracing movement and platform multiplicity.

The future looks interesting for digitally mediated networked narrative; a rise in Augmented Reality Games such as Trent Reznor's *Year Zero* (2007) and Tim Kring's *Conspiracy For Good* (2010) are significantly invested pre-produced narrative experiences knowingly blending the reality/fiction game and narrative boundaries. The Google Chrome Experiments are exploring innovative real-time graphical formats for the Chrome browser via WebGL. Their award winning interactive music videos, *The Wilderness Downtown* and the *Three Dreams of Black* are distinctly narrative and "transmedia" (Jenkins 2006).

Authoring or directing creative innovation in the future seem to be about bringing together industries and stitching together niches/communities with definable quality or qualities as a way counter the risk of blandness or erasure in the deluge. Integrated digital campaigns across media spheres require discrete

70 SEO: Search Engine Optimization, a key method in networked online marketing companies.

genres to leap and link between the different context ontologies. The big question perhaps is are e-lit makers providers of a quality niche or will they offer meta/transmedia authorial skills required to devise and produced the next new round of innovative immersive experience?

FLÂNEUR, A WALKTHROUGH: LOCATIVE LITERATURE AS PARTICIPATION AND PLAY

BY ANDERS SUNDNES LØVLIE

This chapter presents an experiment in facilitating public contributions to an experimental system for locative literature called *textopia*. Discussing approaches to collaborative writing and the relationship between games and art, the paper presents the development and the testing of a game designed to foster participation in the system. The game is based on the recombination of found texts into literary compositions, integrating the act of exploring the urban environment into the act of writing, as well as into the medium that is studied. The resulting texts are read as a form of situated, poetic documentary reports on the urban textual environment. The experiment also draws attention to the importance of live events in building a literary community.

INTRODUCTION

Locative media, such as mobile applications which allow for texts to be geotagged to physical places in the world, make it possible to create locative literature: Texts which can be browsed by literally walking through them. Imagine that you are walking through the city you live in, on streets that you have passed a hundred times, but in your headphones you are bombarded with texts—stories, poems, little drama pieces—which all take place in the street that you are walking down, portraying the street in an ever new light, bringing out all the possible and impossible lives that have been touched by this very space.

This is the core vision behind *textopia*, a media studies project focused on experimental genre design, rather than theoretical analysis. The *textopia* system offers a set of smartphone applications which find literary texts based on the user's location, and play audio recordings of these texts to the user as she walks through the city. The texts are collected through a participatory website, a wiki, and consist in part of classic texts (old enough to be in the public domain) and new, user-created texts.[71]

71 In addition, the project contains a small amount of commissioned work by established poets, which form part of a set of installations created in collaboration with the Oslo International Poetry Festival.

Therefore, user contributions are central to the project. The underlying rationale for basing the system on public contributions is not just an ideology of user involvement, but also an aesthetic concern: I am interested in exploring how locative literature may alter and expand the experience of everyday spaces, and this requires a system that contains texts that are geotagged to the user's own everyday space.[72] The only reasonable way to achieve this is to concede the editorial power to the users themselves, giving the users the power—and the responsibility—to fill the system with texts. This also has a democratic side-effect, implying that users will be allowed to define the project to a very large degree. In the *textopia* project, this has been a conscious choice: allowing users to contribute content means to give up quality control and curation, in order to be able to explore an aesthetic territory which would otherwise be out of reach.

However, a significant discovery in the course of the project is the extent to which user contributions have changed the fundamental nature of the project: users must not only be allowed to contribute, these contributions must also be facilitated. This facilitation does not only pose challenges for usability design, but also for the nature of the participation that is being sought after: if "ordinary" users are invited to write the texts for a literary website, with no editorial and curatorial gatekeeping, can we then assume that the act of writing is the same form of practice as when established authors write literary texts for ordinary publishing?[73] If not, what kind of practice is it, and what consequence does this have for the literary output?

In this article I present an experiment where the act of writing texts for the *textopia* project is re-imagined as a pervasive game called *flâneur*, which takes place partly in the physical environment and partly online. I describe the design process and the testing of the game through several iterations, present some of the texts and the experiences with the players in the game, and discuss the results as a social, literary experiment and its implications for a writing community.

72 The term "user-generated content" is avoided in this chapter, due to the rather instrumental view of user contributions implied by the phrase.

73 "Ordinary users" refers simply to contributors who do not usually write literary texts for publication.

BACKGROUND: PARTICIPATORY LITERATURE AND LOCATIVE MEDIA

The *textopia* project makes it possible to put literary texts on a map so that users equipped with smartphones can walk through the city while listening to literary texts which talk about the places they are passing by. Underlying this effort is the view that participation in the form of user-contributed texts is of fundamental importance to locative media.

Such participation has been a core interest for many different kinds of web-based media for a long time. However, this interest in participatory literature predates the web. One of the most radically participatory literary projects prior to the web was the *Invisible Seattle* project, organized by participants on the IN.S.OMNIA bulletin board in 1983. The participants gathered a vast amount of text fragments from ordinary Seattle citizens through a variety of playful interventions during an art festival. These fragments were then puzzled into a novel, in several versions, one of which was published in print as *Invisible Seattle: The Novel of Seattle, by Seattle*. Rob Wittig, one of the members of the IN.S.OMNIA board, states that "[t]he first years of IN.S.OMNIA only confirmed that an extraordinary creativity on the part of people who did not consider themselves writers could be tapped under the right conditions." Seeing this participation in light of de Certeau's analysis of everyday creativity, Wittig asserts that "messages of lasting interest can be produced by people who are not career writers, who don't consider themselves writers at all." Scott Rettberg, discussing "architectures of participation" and collective narrative in hypertext, notes that the very idea of hypertext "is based to some extent on harnessing collective knowledge." He goes on to imagine:

> a writing community with robustness [sic] of Wikipedia, dedicated to a collective vision of writing a novel that is in effect many novels with interchangeable parts, written according to sets of specific constraints to ensure a degree of formal unity, and tagged with metadata that would make it possible to easily remix novels in thousands of structured configurations. Such a project would be performance, game, and literature.

While the ideas of Wittig and Rettberg are compelling when considered in the context of web hypertext and electronic literature, I believe participation and collaboration is of even greater importance for locative literature. I argue elsewhere that the most important novelty of locative media is the possibility to

expand the space of art outside of dedicated gallery spaces (or, for that matter, central public squares) and into the everyday spaces of every user. The importance of this change is that this is not just a singular symbolic gesture, as when artworks and literature are presented in unusual public spaces. Countless such gestures are made both within and outside of the art institutions, in an effort to connect with wider audiences—but for reasons that are all too understandable, these efforts are nearly always limited in time and space: it is not practically possible to have art and literature installed everywhere, all the time. Or at least not without the use of spatial annotation and locative media. These techniques make it possible for texts to enter my everyday space, and yours, wherever it may be; in other words, a medium that is present in every location where it has an audience. In such a medium, the users of the system can no longer be confined to a role as passive receivers of "content." Since the gallery space has been replaced with the user's own everyday spaces, the users must be granted the maximum possibility to enter into an active role as producers and editors of "publicly created contributions." In other words, this vision of locative media relies fundamentally on user participation.

The vision just described has formed the basis for the design of the *textopia* system, an open system that allows users to read, write, and share texts through an online wiki connected with a mobile, locative reader application. The system is designed to allow the maximum degree of participation from users, being fully open source, and taking as its basis a wiki format where anyone can upload and edit material.

It is essential to emphasize that participation is not just seen as an economical way to create media "content" for the *textopia* system, but a way to democratize the medium and its aesthetics. For this reason, finding ways to get the public engaged in a sustained interaction with the medium has been an important challenge. The primary goal of this interaction is not to test the usability of the interface, its technical properties or the characteristics of the human-computer interactions taking place in the system—but rather to explore how users may use the system to write locative texts, and perhaps in the process develop a new form of literature. To get some meaningful insight into this question it is necessary to test the system on users who are interested and devoted to the idea of experimenting with writing literature as geo-tagged texts. And the most important outcomes of this testing would not be measured by the ability of these users to

complete tasks within the system or their feedback about the experience of using the system—but rather by the user's creative engagement with the system, as made visible by the texts they would write.

On the other hand, this project does not direct itself towards a small group of lone literary geniuses, but attempts to draw in a larger group of participants, both amateurs and professional writers. How to achieve that? One common way to foster participation is through competitions and games. This article details the development of a game concept for using the urban environment as material for creative writing, in a manner which also maps the written texts back on to the environment through the *textopia* system.

GAMES AND CREATIVITY

Game-like rule systems have long been used for the purpose of facilitating creative processes. Within the field of literature, the group of writers who call themselves "Oulipo" ("Ouvroir de littérature potentielle," roughly translated: "workshop of potential literature") is probably the most famous example of this (although similar techniques were in use earlier by surrealists and dadaists). Harry Mathews, one of the group's members, explains how the freedom of creative writers to say anything—even lie—can be an obstacle in itself: "So much freedom can be unnerving. If you can say anything, where do you start?" The author has something she wants to say, a "writerly object of desire," but needs to find a way to express it, which implies choosing between a multitude of possible conventions and genres, settings, scenes, etc. Mathews compares this process to that of translation—while the author knows what she wants to say, she needs to "choose a home ground"—a mode of writing—into which she can translate her ideas. The constrained techniques of the Oulipo provide the writers with such "home grounds," according to Mathews:

> The Oulipo supplies writers with hard games to play. [...] Like Capture the Flag, the games have demanding rules that we must never forget (well, hardly ever), and these rules are moreover active ones: satisfying them keeps us too busy to worry about being reasonable. [...] Thanks to the impossible rules, we find ourselves doing and saying things we would never have imagined otherwise, things that often turn out to be exactly what we need to reach our goal.

According to Scott Rettberg, constraints are particularly important for collaborative work, where they are needed to structure collaboration: "Unlike individually authored works, collaboratively authored works are both the work itself and the series of negotiations between subjects that govern the work's creation." In fact, he claims, "[s]ome collaborative electronic writing projects are essentially nothing but constraints," pointing to projects such as *The Noon Quilt*, in which participants were asked simply to record what they could see outside their window at noon.

The Oulipian strategies are playful, but most of them are not actual games in the traditional sense of having clearly defined goals, and where the players play to win. One example from outside the realm of writing that does come closer to a game format is Lars von Trier's and Jørgen Leth's quasi-documentary movie "The Five Obstructions." The central plot in this film is framed as an uneven game between the two directors—one (von Trier) who challenges the other (Leth) to remake the same short film five times according to highly obstructive rules. The movie gets its central nerve from the seeming impossibility of making a good adaptation of the short film according to the rules, and the surprising aesthetic qualities of the outcomes of following them. The Five Obstructions serves as a provocative argument for how a rule-based game can aid a creative process.

In both theater and game studies, Agusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* is often cited as an inspiration for the use of game or game-like structures to make art. Elena Pérez, discussing the relationship between theater and games, contrasts phenomena like Boal's theater and Allan Kaprow's "Happenings" with the need for games to rely on rules and quantifiable outcomes—that is, creating winners and losers. She points out that Kaprow, while considering play as an originator of art, rejected games because they subordinated free play under competitiveness. For Kaprow, then, games were incompatible with art. Pérez, on the other hand, is concerned with how games facilitate interaction and participation, and points to Matt Adam's observation that "games give large numbers of people a motivation to interact, [and] a readily understood means to do so." Thus, Pérez paints an uneasy balance between artistic play and rule-based games, in which the competitiveness and quantifiability of games constrain the possibilities for artistic expression, while simultaneously creating a situation that contains the conditions of possibilities for the development of artistic creativity.

In other words: games draw people in, give motivation and facilitation for interaction, and help overcome shyness and inhibitions. But one must strike a careful balance to prevent that the value-free nature of art is overshadowed by artificial competitiveness.

DESIGNING A LITERARY GAME

Early experiences with the *textopia* system produced a significant body of interesting literary material, but also revealed significant limitations to the participatory potential of the system.

The first version of the *textopia* system was ready for users in October 2008. It consisted of an online wiki that contained a geo-tagged collection of traditional literary texts about places in the city of Oslo; and a mobile application which played a recording of the text that was nearest to the user's location. My hope was that users would use the system to create and share locative texts for their own pleasure; at the same time it was clear that I needed some way to make the system known to potential users and to give the first users some incentive to try it out. For this purpose, a creative writing competition was arranged, in which anyone who was interested was invited to submit texts and compete for cash prizes of ca. 1300 euro.[74] The texts were evaluated by a professional jury, who awarded prices to three winners.[75]

The competition yielded both a significant number of contributions (forty-six) and significant media coverage, indicating a public interest in the concept. However, I had also hoped that the competition would lead some users to continue experimenting with writing locative texts using our system, and that I could use this activity to develop the system further. This did not happen.

In order to find out why users did not continue creating texts for the system, an informal email survey was conducted among the original participants in the competition, eight months after the competition. Twenty-four of the forty users contacted responded, and their answers led us to conclude that the main

74 In Norwegian currency, 10 000 NOK. This sum was taken from the funds of the research project *Inventio*, which *textopia* is a part of.

75 The competition was arranged by myself in collaboration with the Norwegian publishing house Gyldendal and the *Inventio* project. The jury included Helene Uri (author and jury leader), Bjarne Buset (author and director of information at Gyldendal) and Gunnar Liestøl (professor and leader of the *Inventio* project).

problem was neither usability problems with the system (although they were significant) nor the absence of material awards (i.e. the cash awards in the competition), but the absence of a social context for participation, which the competition had earlier provided.

I therefore decided to experiment with a game format to facilitate participation in the project. The *flâneur* game was developed over a series of experiments and test-runs from the spring of 2009 until the fall of 2010. It was very much inspired by similar "collaborative production" games like *SFZero* and *Chain Reaction*.

Initially, *flâneur* was conceived as a very fast and simple, live event to take place during a poetry festival in Oslo. In this event, the focus was not on experimenting with the locative technology, but rather just on finding a way to make the participants engage with a literary exploration of their physical surroundings in the city. In order to achieve this, I set up some simple rules: every participant would be given a physical location (e.g. a street corner) which she would have to visit and search for pieces of text physically present at the location—such as signposts, advertising, graffiti, overheard conversations, etc. They would then have to document these texts with photographs, and compose their own texts as a mosaic of fragments from the texts they had documented. (As an additional rule, participants were allowed to include three words of their own.) Afterward, the participants would all gather and read their texts to the group, and a vote would decide the winner.[76] In other words, while this event retained the competitive element, I did not continue the use of an expert jury, as it seemed to run contrary to the non-hierarchical spirit of the project.

Forming part of the program at the 2009 Oslo International Poetry Festival, this live event gathered a small group (eighteen) of young, highly engaged participants, and was deemed quite successful as a first test of the game concept. The participants engaged with the idea, scavenged their given locations and returned with a selection of odd, quirky, and highly varied texts which were read out loud and voted over with great enthusiasm.

Immediately after the live event, a second round of the competition was initiated online: All the texts, as well as recordings of the live readings, were uploaded into the *textopia* system by the researcher, and an online vote initiated. The

76 The winners of the vote would receive a cash prize of 2500 NOK (ca. 300 €). The winner of the online vote (see below) received the same. These prizes were funded by the *Inventio* project.

purpose of this was to make the participants consider their texts as parts of the locative system, and encourage them to share the experience with other friends. However, this part of the experiment was only partially successful—while a fairly large number of votes (285) was registered in the poll (which took place on Facebook, in order to connect to the participants' social network), this did not seem to engender any further engagement with the *textopia* website.

Since drawing activity to the website was an important part of our goal, it was necessary to rethink the game in order to connect it more tightly with the online system. As part of a separate evaluation of the usability of the *textopia* website, I had concluded that the wiki format, which is primarily created for facilitating collaboration between a large amount of separate users, was too complex and not well adapted to the individual creative activity that literary writing normally is. Therefore, a new website was set up for the specific purpose of supporting the *flâneur* experiment, based on the popular blogging platform WordPress. This also made it possible to integrate the website more closely with social networks like Facebook, hopefully making it easier to connect to the users' pre-existing social contexts and better facilitate communication between users.

As part of the development process of the new website, a new game was staged with a small group of seven test users. The users were recruited through our university network, and the group was dominated by academics and artists with limited technical competence. In this event, at the request of the participants the competitive element was dropped entirely, and it was framed simply as an aesthetic experiment. However, the game also served to test the redesigned website, and led to a radical redesign and simplification of the audio recording system.

In summer 2010, the final version of the *flâneur* game was ready to be launched as a purely online event. Now the live element had been removed entirely, and instead all social interactions were to take place through the game's website. This decision was made in full awareness of the apparent fact that getting together in real life seemed to have been an important element of why the participants had enjoyed the earlier events. However, this move was considered a necessary evil in order to achieve the goal of making the users engage more directly with the *flâneur* website and the *textopia* system. The rules of the game were posted on the website, and the game was announced through social media networks as well as media coverage of the event (Løvlie "What is Flanør?"). The challenge was simply to compose texts from fragments found some place in the

city, and post them online. After having posted a text, users received a quota of points that they could award to other participants. In other words, participants had to earn the right to vote for other participants' texts by uploading texts themselves. This way, the game would not be decided by who could mobilize the largest number of outside friends to vote for their texts. It also gave participants a reason to leave comments under each other's texts, thus initiating communication between participants who had not necessarily met in person.

Finally, as a change from the previous competitions, and in spite of the fact that funding was available, the option of giving cash prizes was dropped. Instead, the only prize offered was that the texts that got the most points in the competition would be printed in a simple fanzine, to be distributed for free in 200 copies. This was done in order to reduce the level of external motivation for participating in the project—in the hope that the participation that was achieved, would be more related to the participant's intrinsic pleasure in taking part in the activity, and therefore lead to a more sustained engagement with the project. This was in part inspired by the experience of taking part in several games organized by *SFZero* in San Francisco, where rewards always were symbolic and of no material value, something which inspired the idea that monetary rewards might actually be disruptive when trying to foster long-term engagement. This belief was further strengthened by the debates over the effects of external motivation in psychology.

THE FLÂNEUR TEXTS: LITERARY AFFORDANCE MINING

Judged quantitatively against the goal of increasing the level of contributions to the *textopia* project, the *flâneur* game was no thundering success. The game ran from August 5, 2010 until October 1, and despite a significant amount of positive feedback and interest, it did not garner the same amount of contributions as our earlier efforts—altogether, only thirteen texts were contributed. Nine of these were given points by other users, and the five with the most points were printed in a fanzine. As a test of our design, however, the game experiment did show that the system was sufficiently easy to use so that participants could carry out the relatively complex task of creating multimodal, geotagged texts with little or no help from the researcher.

However, the most important outcome of the game was the texts produced in it. Judging these texts, it is important to keep in mind Rita Raley's observation that "mobile media poetics must be understood as a practice, one with

clear analogies to performance and conceptual art." The *flâneur* texts should not be read as ordinary literary texts, but rather as traces of a relatively fast-paced activity—as the outcome of an individual's maneuvering through a game. The experience of taking part in this activity, both as expressed by users and as experienced by this author in his own testing out of the concept, is remarkably similar to that described by Scott Rettberg, in his experience of putting up the stickers that make up the experimental novel *Implementation*:

> In a Situationist sense, the city becomes both a canvas and a kind of playground... I am seeing the city in a new way. I am noticing the signs of graffitists and street artists. I am observing and thinking more intensely about what is at my eye level and what lies beneath my feet, the manhole covers and the details of streetlights, hidden conversations between the official languages of civic life in the city and its subcultures.

The experience described by Rettberg echoes my own, when testing out the *flâneur* concept: I start reading the environment around me, noticing all the textual elements that urban life has trained me to ignore: unusual placenames, advertising posters whose glossy and oversexed invitations enter into absurd juxtapositions with the sometimes dreary environment, the incessant onslaught of prohibitions and the ominous fragments that can be picked up in overheard conversations of random passers-by: "But without that it is not possible to live!" Once I had started work on the *flâneur* game, I could not walk by a wall such as the one pictured below without trying to figure out how to puzzle the names of the shops into a story—even though I had passed by that wall countless times before, always ignoring its contents.[77]

The text resulting from my creative play with these textual fragments is not one that I, as a literary critic, would consider "good" as in "a good literary text"—even in the midst of the creative moment, I am fully aware that what I am creating does not measure up to what I could write if unconstrained by the need to use the texts I find in the environment.[78] Nonetheless it seems not just like a fun game, but also somehow meaningful—perhaps as a recombinatorial exer-

77 Strictly speaking, I did not participate in the game, since my position as organizer and point-counter seemed to require impartiality. However, I did produce several texts to serve as test cases for myself, and examples of the concept to others.

78 The resulting text is also fairly untranslatable, but readers who understand Norwegian can read the text at http://tekstopia.uio.no/flanor/2010/08/guner-i-hus/.

Fig. 1. Advertising wall, downtown Oslo. (Photo by the author.)

cise in taking ownership over the public space the texts are embedded in, stating my right to enter my own voice into the cacophony of the urban landscape without engaging in graffiti art or physical vandalism. Several participants in the test runs and live events of the *flâneur* competition expressed sentiments in the same direction.

And Rettberg reports similar feedback from participants in the *Implementation* project:

> Somewhat counter-intuitively, the fact that the relationship between the implementer and the narrative artifact is not greatly mediated by sophisticated hardware or software, but instead by the physical act of adhering a sticker to a place in the physical world, many participants have reported that the project provides them with a more visceral experience of interaction than those they regularly engage online.

Borrowing an expression from Jane McGonigal, one could say that Rettberg, myself, and the other participants in *flâneur* found ourselves engaging in "affordance mining"—that is, we were reimagining previously overlooked details of the urban environment as new opportunities for interaction and play. This

reimagining is a central quality of what McGonigal calls "ubiquitous games"—games which aim to radically expand the space for play to include the real world as well as all kinds of media:

> The genre, which includes both commercial and grassroots projects, ask [sic] players to take up two core mechanics: first, searching for and experimenting with the hidden affordances of everyday objects and places; and second, exhaustively seeking to activate everything in one's immediate environment. This activation is, in fact, mutual. Game structures activate the world by transforming everyday objects and places into interactive platforms; game structures also activate players by making them more responsive to potential calls to interaction. This is because the act of exposing previously unperceived affordances creates a more meaningful relationship between the actor and the object or the space in the world.

The most important outcome of the *flâneur* game, then, is not in the literary texts as they appear on screen, but in the exploration of a new way of perceiving and interacting with the urban environment. Thereby, the texts take on a certain documentary quality—in that they are produced from raw materials that are found in the urban environment. For instance, Vita Melinauskaite's winning contribution to the *flâneur* game could be read as a portrayal of the multi-linguistic nature of the immigrant-dominated neighborhood Grønland in downtown Oslo, where the location of the text is placed:

> Welcom!
>
> Welcom Grønland, here there is someone for anyone, here there is shelter for friends. Can I feel welcome here? Yes! Ja! Da! Oui! Sim! Yes! Here it's easy to play! Easy to win! Here it's wild & beautiful. Here it's Bistro de Paris. Here it's Italy. Best regards, the City of Oslo. Now on Facebook. (Melinauskaite) [79]

As in any other documentary genre, the documentary aspect of the *flâneur* texts seems to invite social commentary. For Barbro Rønning, encountering a boat named "Blessed" parked illegally outside a missionary organization's

79 Translated by the author of this article from a mix of Norwegian (Bokmål) and English. Original: "Velkomme! Velkomm Grønland, her er det noen for enhver, her er det tilfluktsrom til venner. Can I feel welcome here? Yes! ja! da! oui! sim! Yes! Her er det lett å spille! Lett å vinne! Her er det vilt & vakkert. Her er det Bistro du Paris. Her er det Italia. Hilsen Oslo kommune. Er nå på Facebook."

Fig. 2 Pictures accompanying the text "Welcom!". (Photos: Vita Melinauskaite)

headquarters, the situation somehow seems to offer its own parody. Another participant, Elena Pérez, uses the texts gathered from a historical churchyard by the Nidaros cathedral in Trondheim to comment on the social structures manifested in the titles on the tombstones:

-What is happening here?

-You see… du står her/you are here. Before you: General, Director, Priest, Architect, Captain, Composer.

-And wives?

-What? What is happening here?

-Wives born as Wiel, Vangen, Bryn, Ovale, Jenssen, Krogh. Just Mrs Madame.[80]

Fig. 3. Pictures accompanying the text "What is happening here?" (Photos: Elena Pérez)

80 Translated by the author of this chapter from a mix of Norwegian and English. Original text: "-What is happening here?/ -You see… du står her/you are here. Before you: General, Direktør, Præsten, Arkitekt, Kaptein, Komponist./ -Og hustru-er?/ -Hva? Hva skjer her?/ -Fruer født Wiel, Vangen, Bryn, Ovale, Jenssen, Krogh. Kun fruhustru."

Fig. 4. Pictures accompanying the text "What is happening here?" (Photos: Elena Pérez).

Taken as a whole, the corpus of texts reveal certain qualities about the texts that fill our public spaces. First of all, a large number of texts consist of a mix of Norwegian and English words—both due to the use of English in advertising, as well as bilingual signposts for tourists and the use of English in slang and graffiti. Secondly, verbs are always hard to find—most of the verbs found in public space are imperative and either contain strong requests (usually asking you to buy something) or direct orders (mostly prohibitions, such as "do not smoke"). These imperatives often transform the verb to a noun, as in "no parking." These imperatives point to another important tendency, namely a tendency towards direct address, often through the use of second person: "You are here," or "you ring, we bring." Heli Hannele Aaltonen's contribution to the game may serve as an illustration of all these observations. Inspired by a fence covered in posters advertising upcoming concerts and events in the city, she repurposes the incessant imperative requests of advertising language into a surrealist chant:

discover reality
4 season of the event horizon
wolf in sheep's clothing
discover reality
Ziggy in the myspace sky express shows datarock
discover reality
dark city presents striptease at the shock festival
discover reality
Trøndersk rock in jazz clothing dreams standupshow
discover reality

mass circus presents great bloody feature story
discover reality.[81]

Fig. 5. Picture accompanying the "discover reality" text. (Photo: Heli Hannele Aaltonen).

CONCLUSION

In quantitative terms, the *flâneur* game has been a limited success: It has not facilitated a sustained, active user community around the *flâneur* website. However, the experiment offers some important insights into what is clearly a challenging task. Regarding the technical design, it seems clear that redesigning the website based on a blog tool rather than a wiki tool has lowered the practical threshold of participation: By the help of this tool a number of contributions have been solicited from participants who did not attend any live event, were not in contact with the project and did not receive any instructions other than those available on the website. This shows that the *flâneur* concept is comprehensible and practically possible to participate in. At the same time it is clear that the complexity of

81 My translation from a mix of Norwegian and English. Original text: "oppdag realiteten/ 4 season of the event horizon/ ulv i fårekler/ oppdag realiteten/ Ziggy in the myspace sky express shows datarock/ oppdag realiteten/ dark city presents striptease på sjokkefestivalen/ oppdag realiteten/ Trondersk rock i jazzdrekt dreams standupshow/ oppdag realiteten/ massesirkus presents great bloody reportasje/ oppdag realiteten."

contributing is still a major obstacle to broader participation, and requires more work to overcome.

Regarding the game format, the basic concept does seem to be engaging to users, and is an activity which users like to participate in. Participants are clearly able to engage with a fairly limiting framework of rules to compose creative and surprising texts in a very short amount of time. However, it seems that intense competition is not important to the users of *flâneur*—they are motivated more by the social aspects of the activity, rather than competing to win. Furthermore, throughout the project all live events have engendered more participation (and enthusiasm) than the purely online game. It seems clear that liveness and presence is an essential component in building the kind of literary community that has been aimed for in the *flâneur* game experiment.

If that observation holds more generally, it poses important challenges for future work into collaborative, online literature: How can we combine an interest in exploration of collaborative writing through online interfaces, with the necessities of building a sustained community? This is a question which must be investigated further in future experiments.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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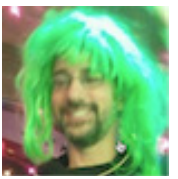
NETPROV: ELEMENTS OF AN EMERGING FORM

BY MARK C. MARINO AND ROB WITTIG

INTRODUCTION

While improvisational theater has a well-documented history, the role of improvisation on the Internet has been only the topic of passing speculation (Laurel 1993; Murray 1998), either applied metaphorically to the user interface or in speculation on the nature of computer-mediated textual exchange particularly in the context of identity formation (Turkle 1995). While improvisation is deeply connected to the authorial practices of players of MMORPGs and their MOO precursors (LaFarge 1995) and to players of story-generation games such as Jason Rohrer's "Sleep is Death" and to participants in ARGs, we are specifically interested in text-centered improvisation that has as its goal the creation of a narrative or narrative world, rather than primarily the development of a game experience.

In this chapter, we propose to define a new category of collaborative authorship on the web: Networked Improv Narrative (netprov), as a genre of electronic literature predicated on establishing contexts for online synchronous and asynchronous writing. After briefly reviewing categories of theatrical improvisation especially the influence of Del Close, we will move into the immediate precursors of Internet improvisation. The remainder of the paper will explore several creative works that epitomize networked improv, particularly works that we, the authors, have had direct involvement, including, The *LA Flood Project, Blue Company, The Los Wikiless Timespedia, the Chicago Soul Exchange, The Ballad of Workstudy Seth,* and *Grace, Wit, and Charm.* The structure of the paper takes on the spirit of collaboration of improv, as we banter back and forth in a dialogue about this emerging form.



MarkCMarino:

@GWandC Finally, my Big News! Sonny, Laura, Deb, Neil: YOU have been selected as the Open House Team! Details: http://cot.ag/mh4Xs8 #GWandC

> **@Sonny1SoBlue** @GWandC Wait, Bob. Strangers are reading this right now? As we work? Every minute for two weeks?Aren't there laws against that? #GWandC
>
> **@GWand** @Sonny1SoBlue Not "Strangers" reading yr Tweets. "Potential Cugstomers!" [sic] Legal in most states. It will be fun! Corporate says so! #GWandC
>
> **@Neil_GWa** @GwandC okay if I drop a mention of my instructional vidz? As long as people are going to be there. #GWandC

The dialogue above is a Twitter exchange (aka Twitterlogue) between a corporate account and two employees. The company, Grace, Wit, and Charm, offers a very timely set of services for the web 2.0 crowd: smoother movements for your avatar(Grace), zingers for your status updates (Wit), and overall attractiveness to your online dating (Charm). The employees, Sonny and Neil, have just found out their private backchannel Tweets will now become public as part of the two-week corporate Open House. Such stunts are almost mundane in the age of guerilla social marketing where every person is a potential carrier for a brand or meme and where the division between personal space and private space is itself a polite fiction. Actually, these two employees are not real either: they are characters in a work of improvised online literature or netprov, a work that any Twitter member could join. While the @ symbols allow them to address each other, it is the hashtag #GWandC that enables the work to create an open stage for networked collaborative performance.

Netprov is a genre born of this media moment out of the classical Western tradition of improvisational theater and the tradition in digital culture of engaging in computermediated communication within theatrical and conversational metaphors.

Rob Wittig proposed this notion of networked literary improv to me during conversation while we were both researching at the University of Bergen in Norway. The term quickly proved itself to be a powerful way of describing the work that both he and I were doing. It not only spoke to our previous projects (Rob: *IN.S.OMNIA*, *Friday's Big Meeting*, *Blue Company*, *Chicago Soul Exchange*; Mark: *The Los Wikiless Timespedia*, *The Ballad of Workstudy Seth*) but also came to shape our current works, including our recent collaborations on the *LA Flood*

Project and *Grace, Wit & Charm*. More importantly, it seemed enlivened with that spark that incited the wit of the Wittig in my favorite pieces from his oeuvre. At its heart, netprov is playful, democratic, anarchic, and imaginative, traits that direct Wittig's work and populate his poetics. Throughout this article we will take turns at the mic, echoing the dialogic nature of our work on this new form. After defining the characteristics of netprov, we will offer examples, including precursors, alternating descriptions of the works with commentary from one or both of us. But perhaps a more conversational structure will better suit such a tag-teamed essay.

RobWittig:

Testing! Testing! Test! Is this microphone working? Test? Can you hear me, Mark? (clears throat)

Yes, Mark, both you and I are experimenting our way to this new art form, netprov. Alongside creating netprovs, my research in the last few years has been to seek out intriguing examples and precursors in the fields of literature, theater, mass media entertainment and games. I've connected the dots between these far-flung projects and tried to combine the best ideas from each into a resilient new formula, projects such as:

EXAMPLE ONE

A cobra escapes from the Bronx Zoo in March 2011. Hours after the news story hits the media, the cobra begins to post messages to Twitter.

> **@BronxZoosCobra**
> Want to clear up a misconception. I'm not poisonous as has been reported. I'm venomous. Super venomous, but not poisonous so don't worry.
> 28 Mar
>
> **@BronxZoosCobra**
> A lot of people are asking how I can Tweet with no access to a computer or fingers. Ever heard of an iPhone? Duh.
> 28 Mar
>
> **@BronxZoosCobra**
> What does it take to get a cab in this city?! It's cause I'm not white isn't it.
> 28 Mar

With its gorgeously simple, real-time fantasy premise and its well-observed everyday voice this project is, to me, the epitome of a single-voice netprov. It is spare and flexible. The narrative can move anywhere from anywhere. Within a few posts the initial joke becomes satire: "What does it take to get a cab . . .". The initial joke itself is not to be underestimated; the snake that speaks mirrors the fundamental, spooky joke of all writing: the lifeless object that speaks. As the cobra's followers multiply, it becomes aware of its own fame. Within a couple of weeks the energy of the project fades away, and so do the Tweets. The project follows the natural life cycle of the medium.

EXAMPLE TWO

During the hard-fought 2011 election to replace long-time Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley, son of even longer-time Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley, someone begins tweeting as candidate Rahm Emanuel, the notoriously foul-mouthed and hard-bitten former Obama White House aide.

@MayorEmanuel Rahm Emanuel
And Daley's gesturing for me to follow him, and suddenly we're out a window and heading up a motherfucking fire escape.
21 Feb

@MayorEmanuel Rahm Emanuel
We're on the roof of City Hall. The wind is fucking strong and the snow stings when it hits my face. Daley heads into a glass dome.
21 Feb

@MayorEmanuel Rahm Emanuel
It's so warm and beautiful in the dome–green everywhere–and the air is pungent with the smell of… is that fucking celery?
21 Feb

@MayorEmanuel Rahm Emanuel
He hands me a small pinch of powder and the sharp taste of celery salt crosses my lips. "Our legacy," he says, and points to the stalks.
21 Feb

@MayorEmanuel Rahm Emanuel
And it's then that I notice for the first fucking time that, nestled amid the stalks of celery are three modest headstones.
21 Feb

@MayorEmanuel Rahm Emanuel
Daley points to the headstones. "They're here with us, always. Harrison, Washington, Dad." He chokes up on that last one.
21 Feb

@MayorEmanuel Rahm Emanuel
I search the ground for three small pebbles. Daley's fucking silent while I place one on each of the gravestones.
21 Feb

@MayorEmanuel Rahm Emanuel
"It blooms year-round, thanks to them," he says quietly. And we're just looking, standing, breathing the thick moist air. Together.
21 Feb

The real-life Emanuel at first objects to the parody, but then realizes it's better for his campaign to go along with the joke. Of course, he'd better get used to improvisational parody if he's going to be mayor of the former "Second City." The project turns out to have been created by Chicago writer Dan Sinker. As Anne Trubek reports in *The Economist*, the twitter feed becomes so notorious that Sinker garners a book contract for his fake Rahm Emanuel (Trubek).

I love these single-voice netprovs, Mark, but you and I are both dreaming of something more: netprovs with multiple characters, netprovs that invoke more complex fictional worlds, netprovs that grab you the way novels and plays used to, netprovs with depth and resonance.

Which is why this next project, on the other hand, has almost all the characteristics of the potential new art form.

EXAMPLE THREE

Game designer and theorist Jane McGonigal acts as "Participation Architect" for *World Without Oil*, an alternate reality game (ARG) financed in part by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, that is first played (or you might say, performed) in 2007. In the game, players write plausible "forecasts" from their varied professional, geographic and cultural perspectives of the results of a sudden cessation of the world's oil supply. According to her account the first period of the game was taken up with doomsday scenarios, but the last part of the game saw the rise of collaborative problem solving. The game leaked out into real life:

mpathytest writing in World Without Oil.

Last week, Emil and I came up with our first crazy experiment for changing our everyday lives in a world without oil. The first thing we decided to change? How we have fun on Friday nights!

We both organized Ped Parties on our respective coasts. There's only one rule for a Ped Party, and it's very simple: you have to walk (be a pedestrian) or bike (pedal pedal pedal!) to the party, both ways. Only human fuel allowed!

…Anyway, after I drew up the map with people's prospective walking and biking distances, I wound up having to choose a rather unlikely location—a German restaurant I'd never been to before.

…turns out this restaurant was also hosting some kind of a Pirate Party. I kid you not. We didn't know that 'til we got there. So my friends and I hung out, somewhat sweaty from how we got there, with folks in full pirate gear. I tried to discreetly take some photos, but they didn't turn out so great because I thought it might be rude to be taking tons of flash photos of the pirates like they were freaks, when really, they were actually pretty cool!

Dear reader, as Mark mentioned, both he and I have been doing netprov-like and netprov projects for a long time and they really challenge, interest and amuse us. We see the promise, in netprov, of an exciting new art form.

IN THIS ARTICLE

In this article we:

1. Pose a working definition and key characteristics of netprov.
2. Talk about sources of netprov in the fields of literature, theater, mass media, the internet, social media, personal media (telephone, text message, e-mail), and networked games.
3. Describe earlier netprov projects we each have done.
4. Comment on a couple of each other's key projects.
5. Talk about *Grace, Wit & Charm*, a project we both worked on, and that I explicitly intended to include as many modes of netprov as I could imagine.
6. Look ahead a bit at the potential future of netprov.

I have known and admired Mark's work for years and know that we share similar tastes and impulses in writing—in particular, an insatiable urge, when faced with a new venue for writing, to jump into that venue and pretend to be someone we're not. The year before at the ELO Archive and Innovate conference in Providence, in conversation my 2010 web fiction *Chicago Soul Exchange,* Mark kindly expressed interest in collaborating on the next project, *Grace, Wit & Charm*. I was delighted. Mark went on to write dialogue in the form of Twitter updates for all four of the characters but took primary authorship of the character Neil. This entailed developing his plotline, formulating his personal mode of Twitterspeak, and acting as lead writer on "scenes," or rather sequences of Tweets, that dealt with Neil's plot points.

Mark's and my correspondence and conversations during *Grace, Wit & Charm* were examples of my favorite kind of literary discourse: critical thinking in order to make decisions about an actual, living work of fiction. My portion of the ideas here are developed further in my University of Bergen Digital Culture Master's thesis, *Networked Improv Narrative (Netprov) and the Story of Grace, Wit & Charm.*

DEFINITION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF NETPROV

Netprov = networked improv narrative.

Netprov authors create stories that are networked, collaborative and improvised in real time.

Netprov uses multiple vernacular media simultaneously in a transmedia storytelling approach. (Vernacular media are accessible everyday communications technologies used without special training.) Netprov's production can be collaborative and incorporate participatory contributions from readers. It can be read as a live performance as it is published; it can also be read later as a fixed archive. During the performance, projects can include breaking news. Netprov projects can use models or actors to physically enact characters in images, videos and live performance. Some writer/actors portray the characters they create. Netprov projects can require readers to travel to certain locations to seek information, perform actions, and report their activities. During the performance, netprov is designed to be read in small chunks throughout the day. It is not always assumed readers will read every chunk of text.

Threshold definition: To be netprov, a work must appear parodically in vernacular media, initially unfold in real time and be at least partly improvised.

The organizational structure of netprov is of an "inner circle" of writer/actors who are "in on the joke from the beginning" and an invited "outer circle" of reader/participant/players unknown to the inner circle. The inner circle operates like a show (cabaret, improv theater, play, or episodic television); the outer circle operates like a game which invites participation from anyone.

CHARACTERISTICS OF NETPROV

Characteristic 1: Prose Fiction

Netprov consists of narratives purportedly by and about people who don't exist (or fictional versions of people who do). Netprov tends to be dialogic and not to use omniscient narration, although nothing precludes netprov characters from succumbing to fits of stylistic self-awareness and beginning their own omniscient narration.

MarkCMarino:

Sorry, got to give you some friction over the "fiction." Isn't the "prov" all about improv from a stage tradition? Of course, we read stageplays as literature, too. In fact, my studies in literary seminars served up syllabi dripping with plays from Shakespeare to Molière, Aristophanes to a script from *Barney Miller*, if I remember correctly. If your criterion is that this form employs dialogue and not narration, drama seems the way to go. Or is it more that the text is meant to be read and not performed? Even there, I'd find the restriction too… er, restricting because to me Twitter Tweets are much more like spoken utterances than written messages due to their brevity and the dialogic nature of Twitter. Or perhaps we could settle on "literature."

RobWittig:

Point taken, Mark. The excitement, and curse, of netprov for me at this point is that I am as comfortable saying netprov is a form of drama as I am saying it is a form of literature. But to further complicate the issue, I'm also equally comfortable say-

ing netprov is a game, a creative game. The answer to your question would seem to be a matter of prioritizing. Is the illustrated text one gets at the end of a project the "main thing?" If so, then netprov is literature. Is the performance the main thing? Then netprov is drama. Is the collaborative interplay the main thing? Then it is a game. But I refuse to prioritize so early in the life of the form. For the moment I recognize netprov's triple citizenship as literature, drama and game. My answer, Mark, is "yes."

Characteristic 2: Improvised

The exact details and phrasing of netprov texts are left to the spontaneous impulse of the writer/actors. The writer/actors often work from a predetermined plot scenario. Texts can be written immediately before publication or written ahead of time and published later using electronic, timed-release technologies.

MarkCMarino:

It's probably a good time to admit that theatrical improv isn't really improvised, or rather, that a lot of what is typically considered improvised or improv-based comedy, from Comedia Dell' Arte to Second City to Waiting for Guffman, is developed improvisationally based on a pre-arranged structure combined with well-rehearsed and essentially scripted elements.[82]

RobWittig:

Characteristic 3: In Vernacular Media

Netprov projects are written in the popular everyday, computational, writing/reading media of the time, regardless of whether or not the medium is considered a "literary" medium.

82 In his history of Second City, Mike Thomas writes of even the earliest days of Second City, "The post-intermission portion (of the show) was improvised using audience suggestions. New scene were born thusly, and eventually new shows. The formula—diluted though it became when writing nudged out improvisation as the primary method of invention—would serve Second City well in decades to come."

Characteristic 4: In Real Time

During the performance the fictional world and the reader's world are contemporaneous. Texts appear to be written moments before they are published. In fact, texts can be pre-written and scheduled for later publication using software services such as Hootsuite or Tweetdeck.

Characteristic 5: Transmedia

Netprov projects can be built in a "transmedia" way in multiple, parallel, non-duplicating media, for example where the same character has a Facebook page, a twitter account and a web page, with different, but coherent, texts evolving in each.

Characteristic 6: Collaborative

Netprov projects can be collaborative, sometimes with certain writers adopting and writing particular characters in whole or in part.

Characteristic 7: Participatory

Reader comments and contributions can be included and can shape the project.

Characteristic 8: Performed and Archived

During performance periods netprov projects unfold in real time. The aesthetic goal of the performance is similar to that of any one-time or episodic show: writers want to get their readers hooked on the characters and situation and to be eagerly awaiting the next communication. Reading patterns vary widely from reader to reader: some read updates as soon as they are received, some read once or twice a day, others catch up on reading every few days, many do all of the above at different times. The pacing and timing of e-mails can be used for aesthetic effect (pacing: awkwardly slow messaging; timing: workday escapes, midnight confessions). Timing tactics work best when the writers and readers are in proximate time zones. Netprov projects could be of any length; most of the ones Mark and I have done have lasted between one week and six weeks.

Netprov projects can also subsequently be read as fixed texts, or archives. This reading more closely resembles traditional book-culture reading. Blogs and social media archives such as Twapperkeeper are often presented in reverse chronological order that requires readers to use a proactive, back-and-forth reading style in order to reconstruct the chronological narrative. The archives can be

edited and rewritten based on Twapperkeeper-style records to become substantially different from the performance.

Characteristic 9: Incorporating Current Events

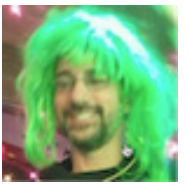
During the performance phase, netprov projects can incorporate current events. Some satirical netprov projects, such as the fake Rahm Emanuel, are primarily written in response to breaking news. Even in projects that are largely pre-written, current events can be woven into the story themes and used to expand and enrich them at the time of publication.

Characteristic 10: Including Physical Enactment in Real Life

In some netprov projects, fictional characters are portrayed by models or actors in photographs, videos, live performances, and live action role play (LARP). In locative media projects, GPS-enabled devices track the movements of characters, or require readers to travel to certain places in order to read certain texts. Other projects on the model of alternate reality games (ARGs) may operate like treasure hunts, requiring characters and/or readers to go to certain locations to get clues, perform actions, read or write physical text, or take photographs to be posted to internet maps.

Characteristic 11: Designed for Episodic and Incomplete Reading

It is not always assumed readers will read every word or every episode. Netprov projects can be designed to give a satisfactory aesthetic experience even if readers see only fragments. One never knows where one's readers read, but an ideal of netprov is to seed the real world with imagination, to sneak fiction into a reader's mindstream during the time devoted to "reality" rather than the compartmentalized time set aside for "entertainment." The strategy is to give readers a rewarding experience both if they read only a few messages and if they become devoted fans. The goal is to be skillful enough to entice readers into the depths. There need be no requirement or expectation of completeness.



MarkCMarino:

Very clear and thorough definition, Rob, and let's not forget the potentials for automated agents to play a role in netprov as well. Based on my research on conversation agents, or chatbots, I would add that agents as simple as Joseph Weizenbaum's

ELIZA (1966) offer opportunities for an improvised performance of a netprov type.[83] But I'll get to that a bit later. First, to the theater and a little history.

LITERARY, THEATER AND GAME SOURCES OF NETPROV

IMPROV IN THEATER

Netprov emerges out of the intertwined traditions of improvised theater and theatrical metaphors used to organize computer-mediated experiences. The theatrical strands stem from the lineage of improvisational games both long and short form, that have developed in theater circles and most notably on the stage starting in the United States in the 1950s with the Compass Players and Chicago's Second City and continuing on with Improv Olympics, the Groundlings, and many similar groups across the United States and around the world. Tim Uren in *Finding the Game in Improvised Theater* offers a brief overview of the recent history of improv in the United States in describing improv games and classifying improv itself as a game.[84] In his words, in simplest terms, improv is "a series of reactions guided by a set of rules." The reactions, in this context, are the responses of the actors to each other in the moment as they strive to follow the rules and respond authentically within the constraints of their assigned role. The rules, or constraints that govern action, are either pre-established in the structure of the improvised piece or are created vis-à-vis the reactions. Uren offers the example of a person who introduces himself with a slight stammer as "Uh…Steve" who then becomes known as "Uh…Steve" for the rest of the performance. As the other perfomers take this name literally, they transfer a momentary pause or verbal tic into a fact of the story, a rule for the game: the spontaneous or accidental slip has become part of the rules of the game itself. Improv involves co-creation of the stage world, dependent on collaborative authorship of previous conditions (retroactively) as well as present developments.

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83 Following the programmed script of a Rogerian psychotherapis, Weizenbaum's ELIZA was the first computer-based conversation agent, a system which allowed interactors to participate in a therapy scene, though they might not have thought of their input as a performance. See Turkle's *Life on the Screen.*

84 Uren draws mostly upon his own experience and the writing of Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone.

Again, we note that improvisation does not require invention on the spot without rehearsal. While audience suggestions may offer some of the constraints of an improv game, for example. Nevertheless, actors typically rehearse these games to develop patterns of reaction. More importantly, much of improv in theater is used in a development process rather than the final project. Examples of this include improvised films, such as those by the team of actors, some Second City alums, that produced *This is Spinal Tap, Waiting for Guffman, Best in Show, and A Mighty Wind*. Improv marks a process of collaborative development of material, but not all improvised material is unplanned or even completely unscripted.

In this sense, improvisation is a form of collaborative performance whose stage and scenery are constructed by the combination of the particular manner and content of the utterances of the performers. These performative "utterances" in the Austinian sense include all actions, gestures, words, and even inaction and silence, with the reinforcement of the recognition of those utterances. While J.L. Austin established performative utterances as a special class of words reserved for certain socially scripted occasions (such as "I do" in a wedding ceremony), every utterance in an improvisation builds that world through the mutual consent of the participants. Improvisation, therefore, is a collaborative construction whose rules of play emerge not solely from the work of any one performer or contributor but by the recognition and reinforcement (i.e., the "yes, and") of the other players.

Improvisational theater, by these terms, operates on continuum with role-playing games, particularly live-action role-playing games (or LARPs). Dungeons and Dragons helped initiate the genre in the mid-1970s with a game that allowed participants to perform the role of fanciful characters while taking on adventures directed by a director-cum-dramaturg, the Dungeon Master. Live-action role-playing emerged at roughly the same time, taking up the classical tropes of fantasy and science fiction for the frameworks for collaborative improvised play. Similar to the table top games, the Game Master of the LARP "is responsible for inventing an enticing world with many things to do in it, a world populated by clearly drawn characters and offering a good dramatic mix of challenges and surprises" (Murray 1998, 150). Meanwhile, "the players have a great deal of constructive freedom in improvising the story"(Murray 1998, 151). Netprov shares with LARPing the liveness, though emphasizes more the collaborative performances over the pleasure of play. It is, however, interesting to note that liveaction

uses the same term popular entertainment uses to distinguish between animated and embodied cinematic narratives.

As forerunners of netprov, MUDs, and their descendent MOOs (MUD Object Oriented), offered a space where players crafted their world not just through text but also through code as they played their role while programming new objects to live in the space. In a 1995 essay, Antoinette LaFarge describes MOOs as a theatrical space of online improvisation. As she describes, "users experience MOOs as a form of shared fiction that they create and inhabit simultaneously. The drama unfolds as text into a unique form of verbal theater with its own rules of structure and unexpected beauty of thought" (LaFarge 1995, 415).

RobWittig:

Mark: yes! In fact: yes, and! (The arch rule of Chicago's Second City improv theater is: "Always agree: 'Yes, and"[Libera]) Where the literary sources of netprov meet the theater sources is in the figure of the writer/actor which begins in antiquity with the ancient roots of Commedia Dell'Arte and continues through the writer/actors of the improv-rooted skit comedy TV show Saturday Night Live such as Mike Meyers, whose improv-and-skit-based character Wayne evolved into two full-length *Wayne's World* movies. Most of the contemporary writer actors come from the theater side, but when we recall the accounts of Charles Dickens loudly acting out his characters as he composed, we realize that the literature side has its own writer/actor tradition to contribute to netprov.

MarkCMarino:

Please, sir, I want some more…discussion of the medium. For this form is emerging not in bound-up serialized novels but on networked computers, which have their own theatrical heritage.

Several of the key facets of netprov, then, emerge directly from improv and roleplaying games. First, both improv and netprov require that works emerge in "real time." The scarequotes here indicate the potential for asynchronous participation through software to time postings or pre-set contributions. The requirement for spontaneity also has deep ties to the imperative of improv to respond to the moment and not to pre-script the experience. In fact, in the Second City school of improvisation, "playwriting" is a negative term for one who is attempt-

ing to manipulate the scene and control or direct the participation of others.[85] For example, in an improvised scene about two lovers one might say, "You always bring up your ex-wife just to spite me," when the other actor has not even mentioned the existence of that character. Such attempts to control the scenario work against the spirit of improv, which is at its core so heavily collaborative.

Because netprov holds text as the central story-telling medium, however, the form tends to produce results more common in literary games. Both Rob and I draw upon both the Ouvroir de littérature potentielle (Oulipo) and the Surrealists (particularly the technique of the "exquisite corpse"), and we tend to privilege emergent process-driven writing. However, the process never fully determines which works are preserved and circulated. For example, the novels *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (Italo Calvino) and *A Void* (George Perec) present not accidental or incidental results of the process, but deeply resonant literary products. *A Void* (*La Disparition*), for example, George Perec's masterful novel written without the letter e, is not merely a tale that has had a vowel removed, it is a profound meditation on loss and absence particularly in light of the Holocaust (Motte). Although Calvino claimed *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* was written following permutations of a Gramscian square, his novel is far more than a mechanical execution of a procedure. Instead, the novel, if it can be called one, gestures toward the impossibility of containing all the configurations of reader, other readers, and the reading experience.[86] Similarly netprov offers the opportunity for quite a bit of polish since the ultimate aim is not to serve the spontaneous process but to deliver literature worth reading twice, to borrow a phrase from Nate Hawthorne.

THEATER, GAMES, AND COMPUTERS

Netprov grows out of a long tradition that frames human-computer-interaction (HCI) within a theatrical metaphor, developed in works from Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* or even earlier Brenda Laurel's 1993 *Computers as Theater*.[87] Laurel, who raises the curtain on this approach, describes user interaction with computers as essentially a theatrical encounter. Specifically, she likens the experience of a computer to Commedia Dell'Arte, portraying HCI as spontane-

85 Derived from an actual Second City course taken by Mark in the summer of 1996.

86 See Peter Consenstein's 1995 essay "Memory and Oulipian Constraints."

87 Laurel explicitly raises the notion of the interface as a dramatic stage (18-19).

ous improvised interaction with established and encoded signifiers and processes, including the conventional costumes for each character, the ready set pieces, and the collection of lazzi or "standard bits of business" (Laurel 1993, 106). Laurel links these constraints to the "formal and material constraints" placed upon "people who are engaged in computer-based mimetic activities" (1993, 106). However, most of Laurel's work is not describing software that offers an opportunity to create theater but HCI in general. It is Murray's *Holodeck* that explicitly seeks a virtual stage as she explores story generation software, autonomous agents, and video games with respect to their potential for interactive storytelling and drama. This image of the *Holodeck*, derived from TV's *Star Trek: The Next Generation* evokes the fantasy of interacting with fully rendered virtual actors. However, theatrical improvisational play on computers did not begin with the graphical browser, but had already emerged on bulletin boards (like the IN.S.OMNIA) and Multi-User Dungeons (or MUDs).

To demonstrate the theatricality of MOOs it's useful to contrast it with another work of emergent, collaborative, networked writing, Robert Coover's "Hypertext Hotel." As in the many rooms of the MOO, Coover's project used the spatial metaphor of the hotel as framework as an ever-expanding setting for a fictional hypertext with many author-guests, who could check in and fill the rooms with drama. As such, both exemplify netprov; however, Coover's was clearly set in the literary realm of fiction rather than theater or drama. Coover's Hypertext Inn invited flights of postmodern prose, while MOOs, by requiring authors to participate primarily through avatar characters, offered affordances for more theatrical interactions. LaFarge notes that she could have called it "online improvisation," "live theater, jazz fiction, or consensual narrative" (1995, 418). However, she retorts, "If I think of it as a form of theater, it is because the real power of this world lies in the ways people inhabit personalities (roles) through words. As with other forms of theater, the point is in the enactment of the text, not the text itself" (1995, 418). In her formulation, MOOs and MUDs are improvised, vernacular forms, fostering real-time (and asynchronous) collaborative and participatory interaction in a dramatic context, all of which are the criteria of netprov.

While MUDs have an obvious place in the lineage from role-playing games to MMORPGs, it is the even less defined, less framed space of the MOO, where the "dungeon" tended to recede more readily into the nomenclature, that made them broad platforms for netprov. Again, LaFarge situates MOOs as theater:

> Within this extensible fiction, one interacts with other people under an assumed name, carrying out activities of all kinds—conversing both privately and publicly, exploring strange places, voting, having what is endearingly called "tiny sex," acquiring property. From this it is a small step to creating roles around a specific dramatic scenario (1995, 416).

Theatrical play in MOOs was subject to oversight of a director who was also a player. More importantly, in the verb-centered syntax of the MOO, actors engaged through actions. The words do not serve as script or transcript but instead words make things happen. Participants were not restrained to playing their roles, they could write actions and dialogue for other characters, affect the setting or stage, and even create objects with particular behaviors. Though MOOs have largely disappeared, their shadow can still be seen in visually rendered virtual words, such as Second Life.

Despite the many surface similarities with theater, it is worth noting that LaFarge still feels it necessary to stage an argument that MOOs should be seen as a space for interactive drama, suggesting they were not commonly perceived as such. When the performative nature of a medium is not foregrounded in conventional usage, the artist intervenes to demonstrate the dramatic potential by staging a fiction and marking it as such. A netprov stages just such an intervention.

Out of this historic lineage arises Murray's dream: the chance of interacting, improvising, with an automated character, a dream glimpsed in ELIZA and its descendants but which found even greater realization in Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern's interactive drama, *Façade*. In this freely downloadable interactive storygame, played as a standalone game on PC or Mac, the interactor takes the role of a friend visiting college classmates ten years after graduation on the evening of the fight of their marriage. The game permits natural language input on the part of the interactor, who can chat with Trip and Grace as they head for disaster. Although this is a game and not an online performance, the software does output scripts at the end of a session. Players may produce a script in which they save the couple from divorce or they might create their own narrative, as in the case of a script by a player pretending he is dying of cancer.

I raise this last example as a way to introduce another major strain in the lineage of netprov, interactive stories, and interactive dramas, a category which can include digital narratives from interactive fiction to story-based video games to conversation agents or chatbots. Although it lies outside the scope of this particular article, chatbots have much to contribute to this discussion of netprov

since they offer a pre-scripted set of responses organized around a character in the context of a framing encounter awaiting an interactor to engage with the system in order to produce a conversation.[88] Arguably chatbots and interactive dramas are the nearest neighbors to netprov or perhaps present an automated branch of netprov.[89]

Without fully reviewing the place of conversation in video games, we can at least gesture toward this realm of collaborative authorship as players interact with non-player characters (NPCs). The world of games also presents a context for improvisational performance in the genre of role-playing games (RPGs), and the text- based exchanges of Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games offer another digitally mediated realm where collaborative play becomes collaborative story-telling. Again, they grow out of a real-world tradition of games, but find exponential growth in online environments. However, netprov is specifically directed toward audiences, whereas in MMORPGs and RPGs in general the focus is primarily on playing the game rather than performance. In other words, the primary goal of the game is presumably the pleasure associated with engaging with a contest constrained by rules, while the primary goal of improv is to entertain the audience (or to produce the work that will entertain the audience).

RobWittig:

During the development and performance of *Grace, Wit & Charm* I came up with a personal goal for netprov in my private sketchbook and posted it above my computer as guidance. I might as well share it here as an elaboration of the goal of "entertaining the audience." For me, the goals of netprov are laughter, insight, and empathy.

MarkCMarino:

Yes, and that explains to me why you align netprov with the literary rather than the purely ludic. Obviously, games are entertaining (i.e. professional sports), but

88 By this token, Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen* presents case studies in improvised scenes between humans and conversation agents, though the humans do not always realize they are playing.

89 And I have argued as much in my dissertation, *I, Chatbot*.

the player of *World of Warcraft*, for example, is more likely to be focused on their enjoyment of the game than to their fellow player's enjoyment of her performance. Nonetheless, this is no doubt a distinction without a disruption in the spectrum of improvised play. Murray predicts:

> Over the next century…we may come to think of cyberdrama in all its variations as an essentially collaborative art form. Perhaps a group of role-players will be like a commedia dell'arte troupe…. The on-line role-playing contributions of amateur improvisers will lead to new formulas of interactions that will feed into the general expressiveness of the medium. (248)

Netprov lives at that intersection of online role-playing, literary creation, and the self-conscious performance of identity online.

RobWittig:

Yes, and the type of game that seems to me to be closest to netprov is the alternate reality game (ARG) as articulated and practiced by Jane McGonigal, particularly in her important new book, *Reality is Broken* (McGonigal).

Alternate reality games are often organized using digital technologies, but they all require a certain amount of real world activity on the part of the reader/player. I described *World Without Oil* above, wherein the main participatory activity is writing. But in the example I cited we see how the player organized a real-life pedestrian party and then commented on it in the text. In ARGs players are often encouraged to role-play in such a way that, when documented as gameplay, the results are indistinguishable from what one, in netprov terms, we would call a creative performance and a fixed, written archive.

A simple example of an ARG McGonigal cites is *Chore Wars*. With graphics straight out of a Tolkein-like fantasy world, *Chore Wars* sums up its conceit in a simple phrase: "Finally, you can claim experience points for housework." A life-management ARG, families can register on the website and the site will track who has earned the most points for cleaning vacuuming or vanquishing the dread toilet bowl.

McGonigal talks about two air-travel related ARGs, first Ian Bogost's *Jetset*, which is an iPhone game designed to ease the stress of airline travel with laughter. Coordinated by GPS, players go on missions in 100 real-world airports around

the world, earn souvenirs and unlock Facebook gifts they can send to friends. *Day in the Cloud* is a game developed by Google Apps and Virgin airlines. It uses airborne wifi to turn the passengers of one flight into a team answering puzzles and completing creative challenges. The system then pits one plane/team against another flying at the same time. In McGonigal's account of this game she expands it with her own ideas, including GPS inclusion of teammates on the ground when a plane is passing over their state.

McGonigal, to me, is at her most inspiring when at her most speculative, like with her game *Superbetter. Superbetter* is a concept ARG developed in 2009 by McGonigal to aid her slow recovery from a bad concussion. She organized physical therapy as a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*-style series of missions that enlisted the help of a nearby and far-flung support network of friends and tracked her recovery publically. She offers the rules of her game at the *Superbetter* website.[90]

McGonigal's background in performance studies at Berkeley helps explain why her games so easily link to netprov's literary and theater sources. I connect her ARGs to a wonderful proto-ARG described by Kim Johnson in *The Funniest One in the Room: The Lives and Legends of Del Close* her biography of improv theater guru Close, According to Johnson, for years a large group of improv and skit comedy actor friends played a "Bang, you're dead" game that went on across two continents. The only rule was that when the finger was pointed at you and the magic phrase was uttered, you absolutely had to fake an extravagant melodramatic death, wherever you happened to be, at home, at work or at the altar. No points were tallied, the goal was aesthetic and surrealist: a point of honor in service of weirdness.

MarkCMarino:

Rob, and let me just say, you are the Mayor of that locale, with netprov badges galore to prove it.

What games, MOOs, and interactive dramas reveal is that netprov flourishes in media built at the intersection of public and private communication. It is the private nature of the status message that establishes the genre as a place for personal revelation and self- narration, performance, yet it is their public nature that provides an audience–welcome, implicitly invited, yet not always intended. Their position as friendly eavesdroppers creates

90 https://www.superbetter.us/

the potential for creative exploitation. Netprov is an opportunistic guerilla theater that capitalizes on the strange public-private conflation in which individual messaging becomes communal performance.

Twitter, therefore, is an obvious site for netprov since by applying the writing constraint of 140 characters, it always involves a kind of performance, where the ReTweet (or repeated Tweet) is the "rave review."[91] At the same time, since it does not require "authenticity" or even verification the way Facebook claims to, members are free to assume roles. The many Twitter versions of the Incredible Hulk provide one type of example, including Database Hulk and Adjunct Hulk. Another, Feminist Hulk, has Tweeted:

> FEMINISTHULK: "TRICK TO SMASHING GENDER BINARY: MAKE SURE IT NOT SIMPLY BREAK INTO TWO NORMATIVE PIECES. HULK CREATE GENDERQUEER DEBRIS!" (Kotke).

Other Tweeters take on the persona of religious figures to comic effect, such as Jesus M Christ. Or in the world of fan-fiction or fan-produced homages, one can witness collaborative play among Tweeters taking on roles from popular television shows such as *The Office* or *Battlestar Gallactica* or even Jay Bushman's SXStarWars based at the annual SXSWi conference in 2011 (Bushman 2011).[92] Bushman has a number of fascinating and fun projects under the banner Sci-Fi Twitter Theater, which exemplify the netprov model to hilarious extremes.

Twitter offers an easy, vernacular platform for collaborative play for a number of reasons. First, play can be easily organized through a #hashtag. Hashtags (the pound symbol followed by astring of letters, numbers, or symbols) are used in Twitter for categorizing Tweets, as a folksonomic tagging system. Users can, in essence, join a conversation by using a hashtag because even people not formally following a user's Tweets will see their posts if running a search on a hashtag. Such a technique is particularly common at academic conferences, but social memes (e.g., #whatmycatateforbreakfast), celebrity names, or even the time of day can serve as hashtags. Second, hashtagging also allows Tweeters the opportunity to devote merely a portion of their Tweets to the play. In other words, if a person is Tweeting on a regular basis, only the Tweets using the hashtag will

91 According to a 2010 study by Sysomos only 29% of Tweets produced a response (a reTweet or a reply), with only 19% producing reTweets.

92 Thanks to Julie Levin Russo for pointing us toward this practice.

be collected in the search. As we found in the *LA Flood Project*, discussed at length below, Tweets can be easily timed using any number of buffering services.

RobWittig:
Mark-O, before we get into those details, let's take this out to the big picture:

MASS MEDIA, INTERNET, SOCIAL MEDIA AND PERSONAL MEDIA SOURCES OF NETPROV

The ongoing search for sources of netprov undoubtedly includes mass media projects, especially as analyzed by Henry Jenkins using the concepts of convergence culture and transmedia. Jenkins defines:

> A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole.… Reading across the media sustains a depth of experience that motivates more consumption. (Jenkins)

Jenkins' work on fan-fiction illuminates the participatory aspect of netprov in a way that supplies pieces of the puzzle missing in the intense analysis of participation that comes out of the game world. Jenkins understands participation motivated by creative imagination more than competition and leveling up. He describes a top-down, media conglomerate movement reaching to meet up with a bottom-up movement on the part of what used to be called consumers. "Storytellers now think about storytelling in terms of creating openings for consumer participation," he says. "At the same time, consumers are using new media technologies to engage with old media content, seeing the Internet as a vehicle for collective problem solving, public deliberation, and grassroots creativity" (Jenkins 2006).

The parodic aspect of netprov means that instead of following conventions it often "draws from life" to use the good old visual arts term. This means that an entire range of real life practices on the internet, in social media and personal media (telephone, text message, e-mail) are also used as models and formal sources for netprov. These include:

- vernacular personal communication of all kinds, including text message and,
- Twitter style and spelling,
- personal blogs, websites, podcasts, videocasts of all kinds,
- mass media, corporate and governmental communications of all kinds,
- collaborative collection sites, such as *Passive/Aggressive Notes* which has branched out from its original mission of showing photographs of handwritten, passive/aggressive notes ("Do Not Leave Your Dirty Dishes in the Sink") to showing bizarre handwritten public notes of all kinds (http://www.passiveaggressivenotes.com) and,
- collaborative creative sites, such as *Tweeting Too Hard* "Where self important Tweets get the recognition they deserve." For example: "I gave my cleaning lady a raise today, even though she didn't ask, as my own little contribution to fighting the recession." Tweeted by brettschulte http://Tweetingtoohard.com

MarkCMarino:
Right, Rob, and don't forget *F*** My Life*, which I can only hope is written with a humorous goal in mind. Rather depressing if it's not. Twitter is rather the natural platform for netprov, no? Which reminds me…

You and I have worked both independently and collaboratively on various netprovs, and it would be useful here to review some of them as case studies. My closest work in this area would have to be:

THE BALLAD OF WORKSTUDY SETH

WORKSTUDY SETH

The clearest example of netprov from my writing involved my workstudy student named Seth, whom I hired in 2009 to manage my social media accounts. Seth turned out to be relatively unreliable, taking off for Cabo in Spring Break and, for the purposes of facilitating my social media presence, never returned.

Fri Mar 06 05:30:44 +0000 2009

@markcmarino just hired me as his "social networking" assisstant, sez all i have to do istwitter, facebook, & bookmarx. its a resume builder, seth

Fri Mar 06 05:32:22 +0000 2009

@markcmarino sez i can call him coach, he calls me seth youtube. my names seth yoo. he seems to think he invented that joke, best not pop that bubble

Fri Mar 06 05:34:06 +0000 2009

@markcmarino haz not made real clear my job duties, but sez i might have to give up some evenings cuz he thinks its better to update late at night (sy)

Fri Mar 06 05:36:20 +0000 2009

@markcmarino doz not seem to ve cleaned this office in 6-7 semesters, random memo from faculty meeting May 05 i found on hiz desk, not my job 2 care (sy)

Fri Mar 06 05:37:04 +0000 2009

@markcmarino jus told me im posting 2 much, need to spread em out, and watch grammar films (sy)

Fri Mar 06 05:39:01 +0000 2009

@markcmarino haz a funny way of implying my heart may not be in the work—what ev. (seth)

Fri Mar 06 05:43:12 +0000 2009

@markcmarino is standing over my shoulder correcting my grammar as a write–I write this. thanks (sy)

Fri Mar 06 06:03:28 +0000 2009

@markcmarino sez his work study funds r limited but if i keep up his updates theres one knock-out letter of rec ready 4 when i apply 2 grad skool. (Seth)

Fri Mar 06 06:17:43 +0000 2009

@markcmarino @netwurker marino sed i was to refer to you as mis mez& that i should o*n[l*y t-y+p 2 u in p^nc+08#n m(ar* --will t-e77 him u gave 2 points

Fri Mar 06 06:30:22 +0000 2009

@markcmarino @netwurker (@@)(@@)(@@)(@@)—im kee7in%a^3y30^u ms. mez—u=+r!Ky(ok brain hurtz)

During the time he managed my account and Tweeted his saga, those who followed me were faced with dilemma: do they Tweet with Seth or with me and if the latter, how could they convey a message to me through Seth? In the last few lines quoted above, Seth attempts to interact with @netwurker Mez Breeze, the electronic literary artist who Tweets in her signature language mesangelle, which combines code-like symbols with natural language. By chatting with her in this way, Seth brings Mez's performance into the realm of netprov as well.

By the way, I should note that Rob was responsible for my recovery and re-publication of the Twitter posts from the Seth period, Twitter being a notoriously ephemeral medium. Fortunately, I was able to download my own Twitter archive and excerpt the portion of time that Seth was operating the account.

RobWittig:
Rob's Comments on WorkStudySeth

(Puts on his Reviewer's Hat) From March 6 to May 6 2009 Marino explored multiple modes of netprov in a series of Twitter messages now displayed under the title *The Ballad of WorkStudy Seth* (recently published in SpringGun Press). Starting with the self-introduction of a workstudy student, Seth Yoo, hired to do Professor Marino's social network writing the sequence begins as a typical netprov character study of a too-cool student bored with his workstudy job.

But then comes spring break, the piece's second sequence, and Seth takes his mobile device on the road to Cabo. He gets rerouted to Phoenix and there begins an intense story that unrolls over several days. Seth runs out of money, tries to get more through Marino's various online accounts, then falls in with an apparently appealing young Luddite named Noe (later called IP123.42.306.X) who leads Seth to the edge of a remote canyon and to the edge of Seth's attachment/addiction to social media. There is a group gathered at the canyon's rim preparing to throw their electronic devices into the dusty deep. Seth meets folks who all have a story of social media addiction. We readers follow Seth's agony as the time approaches for him to renounce electronic posts and hurl his social connectivity into the void. Will he? Won't he? The canyon story sets *Workstudy Seth* apart from the typical Twitter fiction character study. In it Marino's style gets more concentrated, more power-packed, more, well, literary. With direct references to

Mez and the mezangelle style, Marino crafts a hybrid of alphabet-efficient texting slang and poetic practice. Seth's descriptions of the strange scene he is observing and his inner turmoil both become more vivid.

Writing for his subscriber audience of fellow electronic literature folk, Marino need do nothing more than suggest the deep theoretical and historical waters into which Seth peers from his cliff top. The light touch keeps this second sequence perfectly balanced between narrative and theory.

The canyon sequence ends in a silence…which the fictional Marino breaks only to begin the third sequence, wherein Marino tries to repair the damage done by Workstudy Seth and begins to detail his university's judicial review of Marino as the responsible party for Seth's social networking indiscretions. It is at this point that Workstudy Seth, for me, went from being merely good to brilliant and important. Friends and colleagues of Marino's began to tune in and take seriously Marino's supposed tussle with the administration. For example, hyperrhiz editor Helen Burgess emailed him just to make sure everything was all right. The fiction had hit home.

At this point in the sequence a fascinating moment in the project's publishing history occurs. An article appears in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* detailing Marino's project. A careful reader of the *Chronicle* piece will tune in to the fictional nature of the game but the journalist, Jeff Young's, lead is the idea of a prof hiring a workstudy student to Tweet on his behalf, and some readers missed the cue. In a delicious period of vertigo Marino had to ask himself the questions that accompany authentic experiments with fiction: should I tell them it's fake? Should I let it ride? To his delight, colleagues still occasionally ask him: Was that Seth thing real?

But there's more! Sequence four begins with Marino accepting applications for a new social media workstudy student, and winds up with the bland copycat reTweetPete, who, predictably, does nothing but repeat other Tweets and is unutterably boring compared to Seth.

And then, thank God!, Seth hacks into Marino's account for one last brilliant hurrah, and it's sequence five. It turns out that reTweetPete annoyed Seth more than anyone else. Seth strikes a blow for intelligence and urgency in electronic communication (and he tells the end of the canyon story for good measure) in a flurry of poetic messages.

After some gorgeous sequences of ASCII gibberish as the battle for control of the account ensues, Marino finally manages to eject Seth and re-emerges in his own voice in this wonderfully rhythmic sequence:

> Mon Apr 13 20:32:45
> Hi
>
> Mon Apr 13 20:34:51
> Hi, the real
>
> Mon Apr 13 20:37:25
> Hi, th3 $$ real Mark
>
> Mon Apr 13 20:40:57
> Hi, the real Mark Marino here
>
> Mon Apr 13 20:45:28
> Hi, 7he real Mark Marino *$^here breaking into
>
> Mon Apr 13 20:47:57
> Hi, the real Mark Marino here breaking into my own account using Tweetdeck Pro Tool! Whew! I'm back in. And #workstudyseth is out at last!

The project winds down in the sixth sequence into a small coda concerning yet another social media workstudy, the somewhat ditzy searcher Ciara. Then Marino elegantly and gradually lets the waves of unremarkable, everyday Tweets cover over the turmoil of the Seth era.

The thing I find so fascinating and appealing about this project is the breezy fluidity with which Marino changes from sequence to sequence—from narrative strategy to narrative strategy. To me the piece has the unmistakable feel of a pioneering piece done early in the "fictionalization" of a vernacular form. There are no conventions yet, no canon. Marino seems to just follow his wit whither it leads, trying a bit of this approach, a bit of that. The casual willingness to ask "what if" and the unrestricted brilliance with which Marino's imagination answers are delightful. Of course Marino's lifetime of creative writing is in evidence, from stylistic nuances to strategic choices. But the feeling that he, and his characters, are simply following their impulses in a search for intense communication and understanding of the world makes the piece memorable.

In this trim, terse line of messages Marino has explored six different narrative strategies, six different approaches to netprov. Several futures of netprov begin here.

MarkCMarino:
Thanks, Rob, though I am beside myself when you posit Seth as a fictional character. Nonetheless, I am constrained by these "Yes, and" shackles. So onto other projects of related interest.

LOS WIKILESS TIMESPEDIA, LA FLOOD PROJECT

Los Wikiless Timespedia

Prior to my Twitter works of netprov, I frequently developed opportunities for online creative play through Bunk Magazine, an online humor magazine I co-founded and edit. On April 1, 2008, we published *The Los Wikiless Timespedia*, which took *The Los Angeles Times*' early problems with wikis, often referred to as the Wikitorial Debacle, to its absurd conclusion, by imagining what would happen if the *LA Times* launched an entirely wiki-based newspaper.[93] The issue's initial content was written by Bunk contributors but was situated as an open platform to feature the content of any of Bunk's (or the *LA Times*') readers. As a frontpage article explains:

> In a desperate attempt to stop the involuntary leakage of its readership, the slightly less-old gray lady has tried the Depends of new media, embracing a technology that almost spelt its d-e-a-t-h in bright blue hyperlinked Arial.…
>
> "We tried basically all the gimmicks we know," said new Editor-in-Chief Tony Cahter, recently promoted from the depleted typesetting staff. "Different fonts. Moving Marmaduke to the front page. Everything."

93 This 2005 AP story details the rise and fall of an experiment to employ a wiki for more interactive editorial pages, an experiment that ended in revert wars and pornography http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8300420/ns/technology_and_science/t/los- angeles-times-suspends-wikitorials/.

Contributors wrote about topics that were important to them from a play on micro-local journalism as a father reports on his son's soccer match to an analysis of economics as seen through an Angelenos front door, as a citizen journalist uses the graffiti on the wall of the foreclosed house next door to report on the emerging global financial crisis. One writer from Norway, Lars Hamson (possibly a pseudonym) reflected on the perceived rift between Norwegians and Swedes as well as his inability to distinguish his Facebook friends from his real friends.

Following the Zeitgeist of Web 2.0 and collaboration, readers could not just post new articles, they could also edit other people's articles. As the declaration article explains, "If you see an article you don't like or don't agree with, just change it. Then if the next person doesn't like that, they can change it back. We call it an editocracy." Since it's launch the project has slowly begun to sediment with the contributions of spam bots, posting Cialis advertisements and the like. Though asynchronous, this project offered an opportunity for writers to play citizen journalists as themselves or others, using vernacular media, and involving current events. They could even include dialogue on the discussion pages of the wiki. However, although participants did create characters and told stories, the overall frame was not primarily fictional or dramatic.

LA Flood Project

Around the time Rob and I were planning *Grace, Wit, & Charm*, an opportunity to test out some of the technology and methods of netprov arose. At the Los Angeles Times Festival of Books April 30-May 1, 2011 at the University of Southern California, I experimented with a netprov portion of the *LA Flood Project*, a locative narrative that focuses on an epic flood hitting the city of sun and surface written primarily by a collective I belong to known as LAinundacion. For this project, the collective created descriptions of the campus of USC as they were affected by the flood. We would later replicate this experiment during a seven-day period during October 2011 with over seventy participants and thousands of Tweets (archived here). In both runs of the simulation, any Twitter user could join in the activity merely by adding the hashtag #laflood to their Tweets. I will focus mainly on the Festival of Books simulation.

The main events were Tweeted by @LAFloodProject, but I had established several fictional accounts for the occasion including:

- **@ascovelasco**: Manny Velasco, LA-based Chicano writer.
- **@RevLesRFretten**: Rev. Les R. Fretten, African-American preacher
- **@usctechmuse**: Susan Tetris, Greek-American USC-based IT administrator
- **@savvydean**: Anglo-American perpetual n00b Dean of the fictitious Neumann College at USC
- **@troyconkwestppd**: Arab-American Public Policy and Development undergrad at USC

Each character had made about a week's worth of posts and had already begun following people on Twitter and gaining followers, which was an important way to characterize a fictional Twitter user and to spread the piece itself. As with any real-life Twitter-user, you can find out a lot about a person by whom they choose to follow, reTweet, et cetera. At some point, the @LAFloodProject account encouraged people to play along, which meant that the fictional characters did not have to totally expose themselves, since they might be just trying out the experiment.

Participants took both comic and more serious routes, roughly synching their Tweets with the states of the flood presented in the main @LaFloodProject account. This real-time collaboration gave a *War of the Worlds* feel to the project, though the experience was probably closer to LARPing since it encouraged open participation rather than top-down storytelling. Rob joined in the activity even though he was over a thousand miles away at the time.

The *LA Flood Project* actually led to some real life confusion. When fictional character Manny Velasco (@ascovelasco) mentioned the rain falling in the morning, one of his followers expressed dismay as she was driving up from San Diego where there was not a cloud in the sky. When Robert Rex Waller, Jr. (@iseehawksinla) claimed the parking lots were flooded, the USC Parking Twitter account denied this claim. When I Tweeted, "Just saw Mark Danielewski show people how to take apart a stack of traditional novels and turn them into rain hats #laflood #latfob," the message was reTweeted, and to my surprise, Danielewski himself began following my Twitter account.

This preliminary experiment under the name of netprov proved to me that Twitter was an excellent platform for netprov and that hashtags at once could serve as an Internet meme, an easily obtained (forged) passport into the project,

and a marker of the performance's boundaries. It also proved just how powerful buffered Tweeting could be in establishing plot points in a netprov using multiple accounts. For that piece I primarily used CoTweet, the same tool Rob and I would use in *Grace, Wit & Charm*.

RobWittig:

Invisible Seattle and IN.S.OMNIA

My formative experiences in netprov were with the literary performance group Invisible Seattle and it's early computer bulletin board system IN.S.OMNIA.[94] Mark has more to say about them, but I'll introduce them here; a nice web presentation is now available at invisibleseattle.net.

Invisible Seattle

Inspired by tales of Dada performance and Surrealist expeditions, fans of the Oulipo, and enamored of a vision of intellectual life in the cafes of Paris—the early '80s group Invisible Seattle was my first experience of elements of netprov. Combining literary aspirations with backgrounds in skit comedy and political guerilla theater, the group's projects used publications, posters and performance to promote the generative notion of an invisible Seattle coexisting with the visible one–a smarter, more aware, more free, more real city accessed by the imagination. "Every time you read a book, you enter Invisible Seattle" went the early catch phrase. In the role of "literary workers" we devised a scheme for the citizens to help write the great novel of Seattle the city deserved. We dressed in overalls with words stenciled on them and hard hats with question marks, interviewed citizens on the street, in bars, in coffeehouses—"Excuse me, we're building a novel. May we borrow a few of your words?"—and created a vivid snapshot of Seattle in the summer of 1983, the book *Invisible Seattle, the Novel of Seattle, by Seattle*.

IN.S.OMNIA

In the wake of the *Novel of Seattle* project, in the autumn of 1983, our group of Invisibles began to write on one of the earliest literary electronic bulletin boards,

94 Further information about *Invisible Seattle* can be found in Rob Wittig's other contribution to the special issue of *Dichtung Digital*: http://www.dichtung-digital.de/cms2012/journal/archiv/?postID=297.

IN.S.OMNIA (Invisible Seattle's Omnia). Very rapidly we discovered many of enduring modes of electronic fiction: multiple screen names, fake "real selves," tactics of timing and pacing, the heady pleasure of instant publication and the courage of anonymity.

MarkCMarino:
Mark's Comments on IN.S.OMNIA

In *Invisible Rendezvous*, the Rob describes the IN.S.OMNIA message board, an ambitious yet iconoclastic vision of the future (and past) of writing. This bulletin board-centered collective, dating back to 1983, espoused the virtues of collaboration, not just in the death of the romantic individual author, but his swift and merciful euthanasia, in favor of writing that aims not to create objects of elite, high art, but works emerging through the dialogic and generative processes of networked human communication. Rob wrote *Invisible Rendezvous* in a moment when post-structuralism was flourishing and where canons were falling or being pushed into the sea. He frequently cites Derrida and Bakhtin, the same theorists filling the bibliographies of scholarship from the Modern Language Association and, more pertinently, George Landow's early treatise on electronic writing, *Hypertext*.

And while the documenters of the "digital divide" will no doubt trace the exclusiveness of early computing environs, the IN.S.OMNIA message board coalesced from a radically populist writing ethos, one that would flourish twenty years later in the web 2.0 proliferation of user-generated content sites.

In the introduction to the book, Philip Wohlstetter, *Invisible Seattle* collaborator if not front man, offers a revision of the story of Homer writing the works that are generally attributed to him. His point is that the name Homer effaces the work of countless collaborators who have since been forgotten beneath the myth of the sole author. In this context, it is perhaps no surprise to find a collective that eschewed its own notoriety, whose sense of ownership of texts seems to be as "invisible" as the city they pursue. Rob writes, "we too have fond memories of the old neighborhood: the attractive genius, the typeset masterpiece, the obedient reader" (Wittig 1994, 77), but all their new project, one enabled by networked collaboration would cut through the fog of those nostalgic fantasies. This spirit of art emerging from collaborative play rather than individual acts

of planned and plotted genius is at the core of netprov, growing directly out of improv, that insistance that the audience shape performance, the belief that the stage is served less by pre-hearsed scripts and more by in-the-moment problem solving, constraints met by collaborators engaged in processes.

It is a moment, too, born of technologies of relative open access compared to the heavily gated book publishing world. During *Invisible Seattle* the collective imagined the potential use of computers. As Rob notes, "The computer was a happy solution to problems [my collaborators] had begun to pose long before" (Wittig 1994, 77). In the last section of *Invisible Seattle*, Rob seems to call forth the very collaborative software he would later use in his netprov projects:

> Let's finally see a bulletin board that will capture the rhythm of composition—the pauses, false starts, erasures. Imagine a user signing on under a pseudonym and copying a message, already written out in longhand, onto the system–putting in false pauses, fake corrections, just for effect (Wittig 1994, 170).

The description seems to describe the very bulletin board later used by the writers during IN.S.OMNIA yet is also uncannily similar to the Twitter feeds of *Grace, Wit, & Charm*, embodying that ethos of the literary simulation of spontaneity, the careful production of the casual utterance. Yet that casual utterance isn't the expression of one's deepest soul, but a collaborative charade, a improvised performance.

The heart of netprov, then, is the disruption of the contract that links every user to every utterance, this sense that each netizen will have exactly one self, again the end user terms of Facebook. Rob's radical project is to shatter the one-to-one model with a several-to-many notion: "Instead of the one-human-being-to-one-self-to-one-voice equation, a typical IN.S.OMNIA project might be charted as including seven human beings, twelve selves, and fifteen voices" (Wittig 1994, 155). He raises this insanely playful question: "What if the self and the voice, or the selves and voices are rotisserie leagues of each other" (Wittig 1994, 155). Such metaphors reveal Rob's project to be much more than just an experiment in collaborative authorship but moreso a provocation about the conventional stories of authorship.

However, these anticipatory writings about networked collaborations do not merely describe the abstract notions that will become netprov; they foretell the form of netprov. Rob describes a writing collective in which writers approximate "a group of comic impersonators who share a pool of voices that each can do

with a greater or lesser effect" (Wittig 1994, 155). *Grace, Wit, & Charm* followed that description literally as the comedy improv team of performers and authors took on the roles of the characters onstage and through authoring lines for various characters through Twitter.

But, Rob, you should IN.S.OMNIA was really on the beginning. It is in your other works that this form of writing rappidly evolves in so many directions like an e-lit Galapagos.

RobWittig:

Friday's Big Meeting, Blue Company, Chicago Soul Exchange

That's right, Mark. I did not come suddenly to netprov. I did a series of projects that got progressively more netprov-like, until I arrived at the fully-featured netprovs of the present day. The following projects were the major points on my trajectory.

Friday's Big Meeting

Into the web era, my 2000 web fiction *Friday's Big Meeting* purported to be the full record of five days' worth of writing—public and private—in a struggling web company's proprietary chat room. Entirely pre-written, the five pages were published over five work days and publicized as a performance (Wittig "Friday's Big Meeting").

Blue Company

My novel in e-mail *Blue Company* was performed twice, in 2001 and 2002, by sending out roughly an e-mail a day for a month to subscribers. Pre-plotted and substantially pre-written, this was the first project I had done that included current events. http://www.robwit.net/bluecompany2002 To my delight, Scott Rettberg responded to and/or contradicted *Blue Company* by continuing the lives of the characters in his *Kind of Blue*, http://tracearchive.ntu.ac.uk/frame/kOb/index.html.

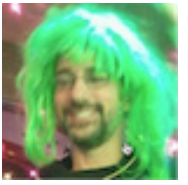
Blue Company was my first exposure to the exquisite excitement and stress of creating, managing and, well…"living" characters in real time. I know you know that experience too, Mark. The life of netprov is obsessive, elated and sleep-deprived. Knowing that an audience is following the story in real time gives

me a deep feeling of both creative power and responsibility. Others are already invested in the characters. Their opinions count. I have to do right by them (both the characters and the audience)…but I have no time to make a balanced judgment. The next installment is due…now! Added to that is the vertiginous fun of making brand new decisions in a brand new creative form. You can rely on previous models, but only to a certain extent. "How does a novel in e-mail end?" I asked myself. "How the heck should I know? Let's try this," I answered. I took Scott's continuation as an indication I had made a good choice.

Chicago Soul Exchange

2010's *Chicago Soul Exchange* was a blog-based fiction that unrolled during a weeklong performance. The project's premise is based on the assertion that there are more human beings alive now than the sum total of human beings who have lived before, making it arithmetically impossible for everyone now to have a past life. I posited the existence of an online secondary market in past lives—a spectral eBay—called Chicago Soul Exchange, and I imagined its proprietor, the kindly and confused PastLifeMaven.

With the help of an inner circle of collaborators the story unfolded in timed blog entries and in comments and bidding on the online Catalog of Past Lives. Outside readers of the project could bid on lives, make comments and help advance the story if they were so inclined. *Chicago Soul Exchange* currently awaits reformatting and archiving before it can be seen again.



MarkCMarino:

It's amazing, Rob, how each of these projects plays on its medium or Internet milieu in ways that are more than just pragmatic, more than merely using it as a platform. You are interrogating/parodying/satirizing these modes of communication even as you are extending their potential use. But none of these projects were as obviously netprov-y as the next one.

RobWittig:

GRACE, WIT & CHARM: FULL-FEATURED NETPROV

Website: http://gracewitandcharm.com
Twitter Log: http://bit.ly/gracewitandcharmTweets/

That's right, Mark. Now we come to *Grace, Wit & Charm*, which is still fresh in my mind. Here's how I set it up.

THE SET-UP OF GRACE, WIT & CHARM

A promotional announcement mailed and Tweeted on May 1st, 2011 read:

> In just two weeks, you'll get a chance to peek behind the curtain of the underground success that's sweeping the virtual world. *Grace,Wit&Charm*™—the net's premiere character enhancement plugin—is pleased to invite you to our Online Open House, May 14th–29th on the web at gracewitandcharm.com, and in Twitter @GWaC. And come join us in the live audience for the two exhibitions streamed from Teatro Zuccone on May 17th & 24th. Bring your cell phone and keep it turned on! What's all the fuss about? Grace™ helps our clients' avatars battle better, dance better, and even shrug-causually-with-a-winning-smile-and-a-wise-twinkle-in-the-eye better! Wit™ allows the "online you" to deflect attention from your foibles while deftly landing a zinger! And Charm™…ohhhhh, Charmmm… brings out the inner Romantic you never knew was inside you…because it wasn't!! Like so many others, you and your personality need the Turbo-Boost only *Grace,Wit&Charm*™ can provide."

SYNOPSIS OF GRACE, WIT & CHARM

What readers found on the website, on Twitter, and in the theater, was the hardworking day shift team of the Duluth, Minnesota *Grace, Wit & Charm* call center: Sonny, Laura, Deb and Neil, and their slavedriver boss Bob. The team had been working twelve hours a day, seven days a week since November (the company's reaction to the bad economy) and was totally surprised to be suddenly

identified as the Open House Team, and to have all their Tweets and blog posts be made public.

At the call center, when Wit (humor) and Charm (romance) problems came in, the team members wrote solutions on their smart phones and wise-cracked about each others work. When Grace (avatar motion) problems came in, the team members, always clad in motion-capture suits, leapt into the motion capture grid to pantomime their solutions. And the whole time Bob the Manager is urging them to more productivity as the team competed with their hated rival team in Shreveport for the prize of the Team Vacation.

The *Grace, Wit & Charm* team was professional. But the team was tired, the team was grumpy, the team (like so many employees) had to live its personal life at work. Between solving customer problems, the close-knit group helped Laura manage her love life, helped Deb deal with her houseful of kids, helped Neil accept the fact that his military contractor wife in Afghanistan had been cheating on him, and helped Sonny prepare for the Grand Nationals of his beloved sport: remote control model snowmobile racing. Three-day sub-plots featuring different characters overlapped and interwove over the course of the two weeks.

The two live shows were designed to showcase crucial moments of multiple subplots. The first live show established Laura and Sonny as a power duo for solving romantic problems. After struggling with her on-again, off-again boyfriend the whole show, Laura decided to become a GW&C customer and officially request Sonny's help in wooing the boyfriend. Sonny was torn between his personal scorn for the boyfriend and his professional pride.

By the second live show the team was doing more and more of the new, health-care based work, virtually tending to shut-ins and performing small, online medical procedures. Only Sonny seemed to have some qualms about doing the medical work without any training. By contrast, in her Tweets during the week Deb had shown herself to be more than enthusiastic, finally seeing a chance to live out her frustrated dream of being a physician. Well, a veterinarian. During the second show, Deb was scheduled for her first real online surgery—a carpal tunnel job. Neil, who had been suffering from carpal tunnel woes for days, asked Laura to imitate Deb's motions and perform the surgery on him for real. This was his only option, since the company wasn't providing health care. The final tableaux of the double surgery—one virtual on the motion capture grid and one live on stage, ended the performance.

The final days of the project saw the realization of the romance between Neil and Laura and their elopement into a virtual world in which Laura had long been a high priestess, and the rescue of one of Deb's kids from video game addiction. The new flood of medical assignments started to include more end-of-life, hospice care, at which Sonny showed his subtle skill. Our Duluth team wound up losing the contest for the Team Vacation by a hair to Shreveport, but Bob relented and arranges for them all to join Neil and Laura in a virtual holiday.

The last words of the project were as Sonny and the team said goodbye to a dying client/patient and goodbye to the readers. When, where and how does a netprov end? It's difficult for me to say with any certainty. As lead writer, it was emotionally "over" for me in some way when I sent the final message. But, like all archived literature, it lives on for new readers.

THE FORM OF GRACE, WIT & CHARM

In terms of the list of characteristics of netprov, above, *Grace, Wit & Charm* was:

Prose Fiction: If *Chicago Soul Exchange* was intended to be "novella sized," *Grace, Wit & Charm* was intended to have the breadth, depth and heft of a novel.

In Vernacular Media—*Grace, Wit & Charm* reached its audience via coordinated, transmedia use of thirteen media modes:

1. e-mail promotion,
2. Facebook promotion,
3. a placeholder/promotional website (before May 14th, 2011),
4. a fictional business website (after May 14th, 2011),
5. direct Twitter subscription or "following" of the five main characters,
6. following the Twitter hashtag #GWandC,
7. widgets on the fictional business website showing the most recent Tweets from four of the characters,
8. a blog with comments on the fictional business website,
9. linking to a Twitter group that followed the five main characters from a page of the fictional business website,
10. linking to a hashtag archive at the website TwapperKeeper,
11. two hour-long live performances at Teatro Zuccone, a professional theater in Duluth, Minnesota,

12. live web streaming of the Teatro Zuccone shows,
13. streaming archival video of the performances.

In Real Time: Mark, the four actors and I used the Twitter text management website CoTweet to time the release of the texts precisely…unless, as sometimes happened, I messed up and sent out messages immediately instead of setting the timing for them to appear later. In a word: oops.

Often Parodic and Satirical: Besides lampooning topics such as embodiment and disembodiment in networked living, online romance, and game addiction, the project pointedly looked at the health care crisis in the U.S.

Partially Pre-written and Partially Improvised: GW&C was 90% preplotted in a sequence of three-day-long, overlapping sub-plots which I dubbed "three day tizzies" involving all five main characters and an overall character/plot arc: Neil and Laura fall in love and elope to her virtual world. Line-by-line writing was done approximately 60% in advance and 40% on the day of online or social-media publication.

Transmedia: The simultaneous use of all the vernacular media listed above makes the project eminently transmedia.

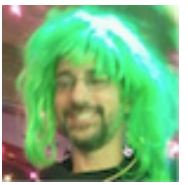
Participatory: I developed the fictional frame tale, wrote the initial scenarios and character descriptions. Characters and scenarios were workshopped and elaborated by Mark Marino and the four experienced actors: Jamie Harvie, Gary Kruchowski, Cathy Podeszwa, Shannon Szymkowiak. writer/actor/director Jean Sramek wrote dialog for different characters and was the director/stage manager for the live performances. While not formally a troupe, many of these actors had worked together before; Shannon was for years a professional improv actor in Minneapolis. Mark also has some improv training. Writer Margi Preus gave notes on the scenarios and the live show, and writer friends Chris Julin, Catherine Winter, Scott Rettberg, Paul Cabarga and Tom Grothus contributed problems and solutions in advance and during the performance request. I was the graphic design director of the website and other aspects of the project. Artist Joellyn Rock did stage design, costume design and digital art for the website and the back-projection on stage. Designers Laura LaBounty and David Roberts created the GW&C website. Designers Matt Olin and Eric Stykel contributed illustrations. Other writing for problems and solutions came in from unknown pseudonymous web and Twitter contributors.

Performed and then Archived: As of this writing the creation of the web archive of the project is in progress. Currently, the Twitter feeds can be accessed through a TwapperKeeper log.

Characters Portrayed Physically by Modeling and Acting: The four actors adopted their characters wholeheartedly. One of my best memories of the performance weeks was how quickly and seemingly effortlessly the actors would drop into character and riff on themes from the project, in rehearsal or around a restaurant table. The mugshot images of the characters on the website and in the Twitter feeds are key to the impact of the project.

Designed for Episodic and Incomplete Reading: With thirteen parallel modes of communication, each reader was able to remix the piece at will. Given the simultaneous communication modes, A "complete" reading of Grace, Wit & Charm is impossible, given simultaneous communication modes.

Included Current Events: A few references to current events were included, but breaking news didn't play a huge part of the story.



MarkCMarino:

MARK'S FIRST FEW REFLECTIONS ON THE EXPERIENCE/EXPERIMENT OF GRACE, WIT & CHARM

Grace, Wit,& Charm was the most extensive netprov project I'd worked on to date when measured by the intensity of the time commitment before and during the two weeks it ran, the sheer complexity of the multiple interwoven storylines with their serialized structures, as well as the added surprises of audience interaction. As such, it stands a useful case study for netprovs to come.

Audience Participation

Originally the part of the project that interested me most was the opportunity for real-time audience participation both via the Twitter feeds and during the live show. Since I was off the clock in Los Angeles during the live shows (not Tweeting as Neil), I found myself writing job requests for the team. But since we had already begun the convention of using dummy Twitter accounts, I found myself quickly opening new accounts for characters and Tweeting requests. During the first show, I was watching with an audience at the E-Poetry conference

in Buffalo, sitting next to the current Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) President Nick Montfort and digital poet and ELO Board member Stephanie Strickland, who would feed me requests that I would submit as masked Twitterers. The fun of watching the improv troupe try to handle these requests in real-time showed me that this extension of the theater to the long- distance audience is clearly the future of staged improv.

During the Twitter streams throughout the two weeks, audience members would also write in with requests and interact with the characters, such as @civicminded1, a heart-on-her-Tweets, politically engaged netizen, who would offer feedback for the employees on their latest interactions. Also, there were a few crossovers, when, for example, SavvyDean from the *LA Flood Project* Tweets chimed in. While I expected a larger number of participants, the project did again prove the ease of development for netprov on Twitter.

Writing Dialogue in Twitter

One of the challenges to using microblogging platforms to write narratives is akin to the main challenge of humor itself: timing. Having to Tweet in real-time can be a thrilling constraint but limits story possibilities, especially if you are not writing for a project full-time. Also, it makes dialogue between multiple characters written by the same person practically impossible, like a very cumbersome kind of ventriloquism act. As I discovered during the *LA Flood Project* simulation, CoTweet would enable us to buffer our Tweets and time dialogue across multiple characters and accounts. That meant we could not only stage dialogues that would happen at certain times, but we could also have characters make posts simultaneously, pushing their twitversations out of sync, something that replicates real-life Tweeting much more closely. Unbeknownst to Rob, I would also use additional buffering services when I wanted to schedule surprises for him, since he had access to the characters in the CoTweet account. Being able to time Tweets also allowed us to establish a verisimilitude that was unprecedented in online storytelling, since many people in our audience did not know that Tweets could be buffered.

I should note, following the model of netprov, the main action was sketched out but only a portion of the lines were written in advance. There were many times where a pre-written dialogue would be unfolding while Rob and I were handling live comments that were coming through the Twitter feed. This

multiplicity of conversation threads seemed to match Twitter usage as people often make mini-digressions even as they reply to other Tweets all mixed together. As Rob mentioned, the speed and shear number of accounts often led to errors. Sometimes we would Tweet a line from the wrong character, no doubt in part due to managing multiple accounts at the same time both buffered and in real-time. Of course, that kind of slippage is part of what makes Improv so much fun. That's my excuse, at least.

RobWittig:

ROB'S FIRST FEW REFLECTIONS ON THE EXPERIENCE/EXPERIMENT OF GRACE, WIT & CHARM

What is "The Real Thing?"

During *Grace, Wit & Charm* sometimes I found myself thinking that the performance was the most important part of the project–the "real thing"–and that the archive was going to be a pale imitation, a "mere" documentary video of a stage show. Then the next moment I would find myself thinking that the archive was the real thing, and that all we were doing was allowing some folks to observe the writing process. It really depended on whom I was asking – internally (among my multiple selves) and externally. Theater people, predictably, thought of the theater shows as the real thing. Web artists thought of the website as the real thing. Writers thought of the archive as the real thing. It is exciting to me that there is no definitive answer at this, early, moment in the life of the art form. I'm curious to see which mode—which cultural milieu—might eventually hold sway.

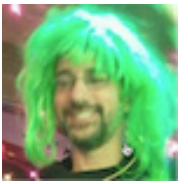
The Writer/Actor

One of the findings that jumped out during *Grace, Wit & Charm* was the intriguing role of the Writer/Actor. The Duluth actors who improved the live shows, wrote some Tweets, and modeled for the web photos of the four main characters wound up truly adopting their characters and began to write some pieces of text in character during the performance period. The one exception, by happy happenstance, was the actor whose character was already largely being written by Mark Marino. Even though Mark was not the public face of the char-

acter Neil, Mark created a masked video to include in the project (http://bit.ly/zumbaneil). The closest models for the writer/actor I know are the film writer/actor, the improv or skit comedy actor who writes her own material for a character she has developed or, again, the live-action role-player.

HOLOGRAPHIC NARRATIVE

Perhaps netprov needs to be holographic in its narrative structure. That is to say that the whole narrative should probably be retold in miniature in every beat. Since the readers can enter from any direction at any time, the writing needs to be constantly repeating exposition as it delivers the current installment. While remixing some of Mark's drafts and composing new writing I found myself making Neil and the other characters say "my wife," "Neil's wife," "your wife," instead of "her" so that it's very plain who's being discussed.



MarkCMarino:

THE END OF ACT I

Well, said, Rob, but I think I hear the music playing, sending us out into the commercial break. Let me see if I can wrap up a bit.

Netprov does not represent a sudden shift of online entertainment and play but rather arrives as the slacking heir to a rich tradition of theatrical computer-mediated play and real-time collaborative performance. It builds upon the history of impersonation and obfuscation in online networked communication that was perhaps more familiar in early chatrooms and bulletin boards such as IN.S.OMNIA than the verified and authenticated identities of the Facebook era. It draws upon the techniques of collaborative writing that long pre-date the dawn of computers and borrows from the spirit of parlour games from days when even a corset did not get in the way of clever word play among friends. What is crystallized in netprov, however, is the opportunity to collaborate with other writers in the very space where we put in our hours at work; the stage is the very screen on the desk in the cubicle. So it is fitting that one of the early works ushering in this form is clothed in the language and culture of a contemporary Internet start-up, in the awkward suits and skirts of an office comedy. Though netprov borrows the energy of spontaneity of traditional theatrical improvisation, because of the

text-based relay technologies, it offers the opportunity to add dialogue with more resonance than the free-flowing vernacular from the top of the actor's head. Call it studied improv, or even literary improv. In this way, netprov hearkens equally to the writing games of the Oulipo and to the games of Chicago-style short-form improv. Finally, since it seeks to outlive its performances, netprov is often allowed the indulgence of editorial embellishments and fixes not typically afforded a live stage show. Growing out of both a theatrical and computer-mediated improvisational traditions, netprov continues to emerge into a powerful genre of online collaborative performance. Let the games continue!

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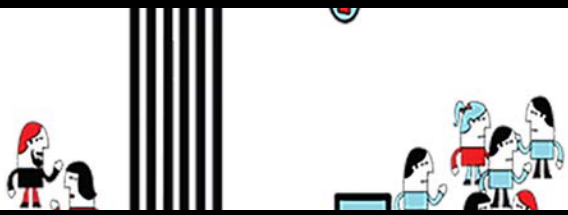
This is a diverse collection on the role and function of community in the contemporary practice of electronic literature, with ten essays by thirteen leading authors, offering wide-ranging perspectives and approaches. The collection offers historical narratives of institutions in the field, examples of how particular platforms or genres can inspire community, and stories of how ad hoc communities can form around specific creative projects. These case studies are histories of creative affiliations in electronic literature—snapshots of consensus-based communities in their process of formation—and offer a starting point for broader theoretical analyses of network-based creative community

"Originating from the highly innovative research initiative, Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice, and the prestigious journal *Dichtung Digital*, Electronic Literature Communities makes clear that electronic literature has emerged as a viable field of study and practice with an ecology of scholars, artists, organizations, publications, and activities contributing to its vibrancy and ongoing development. The authors selected for this volume are among the most respected world-wide for their knowledge of the field (Scott Rettberg), its cultural-historical contexts (Jill Walker Rettberg), and art communities (Simon Biggs, Loss Pequeño Glazier), as well as those involved in specific areas of scholarship and practice, such as interactive fiction (Emily Short & Nick Montfort), Flash (Donna Leishman), and Netprov (Mark Marino and Rob Wittig), to name just a few the book addresses. At a time when digital interventions are no longer anomalies but rather accepted and exciting modes of human expression, this book is a necessary read for anyone interested in the evolving nature of literary art." — Dene Grigar, President, Electronic Literature Organization; Director and Professor, The Creative Media & Digital Culture, Washington State University Vancouver



SCOTT RETTBERG is Professor of Digital Culture in the Department of Linguistic, Literary, and Aesthetic Studies at the University of Bergen, Norway. PATRICIA TOMASZEK is a PhD candidate in the Department of Linguistic, Literary, and Aesthetic Studies, University of Bergen. SANDY BALDWIN is Associate Professor of English and Director of the Center for Literary Computing at West Virginia University.

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