

# Editing Electronic Literature Scholarship in the Global Publishing System

Tiffany Zerby, [tiff.zerby@gmail.com](mailto:tiff.zerby@gmail.com)

Sandy Baldwin, [sbaldwin66@gmail.com](mailto:sbaldwin66@gmail.com)

## The Global Publishing System

Electronic literature (e-lit) works exist in a field of publication, characterized by circulation, commentary, and archiving. The works are subject to complex corporate toolchains, software updates, social media, etc. *A work is no longer just the work but the entirety of this field.* Publication is no longer a single event or a single thing. Perhaps this was never the case: publication was always already a complex event, tied to institutions—of formalization, location, dating, and so on—such as the author’s name, the ISBN, the title. “Format disruption,” according to Andrew Savikas, CEO of Safari Books, results in “radical changes in how continued demand for the form [that is, the book] is met.”<sup>1</sup> Format is a material support for a form or configuration of information. A focus on format disruption let’s us follow new configurations of information across complex systems of distribution. Our concern is contemporary “format disruptions” leading to a new experience and practice of scholarly publishing. In particular, our focus is not on publications of works of e-lit but publication of scholarship about e-lit.

Think of this in terms of Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory: the differentiating distinction between artistic production and critical discourse is shifted; the difference made by artwork—its “poetics”—is now systematically linked to critical discourse. Our essay is a call for editors and publishers of works on and about e-lit to become active participants in the process of creating the entire work and in creating the field around works of e-lit. Traditionally, editing was the “invisible art”—as was said of film editing—and editors worked largely worked in the background. By contrast, the contemporary publishing situation—as well as the specifics of publishing on e-lit—enables publishers and editors to address the global with local realities of writers, the virtual with the material concerns of the text, and the instantaneous with the measured need for critical reading.

To be clear: this is already taking place in the e-lit field. The simple fact that there are collections with works by authors attests to the existence of growing canon and archive of discourse around the field. A project such as ELMCIP is explicitly tasked with describing the authors and networks in the e-lit community.

Our essay is a more utopic call. What does e-lit want to be? Not just what new works and new forms of practice do we project or need, but—from the point of view of critical and scholarly publishing—what role do we play?

Sandy: Publishing - creating a book - is an act, is an extension of our actions. In a way, a book is a paradigm of all creative action. How can contemporary publishing be seen as a creative act? We are familiar with the claim by journalists etc. that publishing is in a “crisis”—a claim that presumes the shift to ebooks, and the accompanying reduction in printed output, is driven by economics (in an era of sequestration and global austerity, so on; a situation where—so the argument runs—print is too expensive, etc.). I wonder if there’s another way to describe it rather than in crisis, to avoid that sense, to see ebooks as something more creative? Crisis is reactive, creativity is proactive and pragmatic.

Tiff: There has been a definite shift in the format of ebooks. As they have in the past resembled the printed copy, contemporary publishing is making more interactive, multimedia ebooks, coined as “enhanced ebooks.” But, this makes me wonder if the shift to ebooks was purely caused by economics. The book is moving with our technology, and although feelings are mixed about its digital format, we can be grateful that literature is not simply carried on but beyond the technology (paper) to the computer.

1 Andrew Savikas, “Distribution Everywhere.” Web. <http://book.pressbooks.com/chapter/distribution-everywhere-andrew-savikas>. NP.

Keep in mind: what e-lit wants is also a question of what does e-lit want of the computer and the network, and of the articulation of computer and network with larger systems of capital—specifically for us, the publishing system. Such a utopic question involves recognizing the intertwined dynamics of e-lit artistic production and critical production, and using this recognition to construct and propose the future place of e-lit through a directed practice of critical publishing.

The crisis in university publishing is well known. A key aspect is the scaling back of smaller university presses, such as the example of the closing of Rice University Press after its ambitious attempt to go all-digital. We want to question this sense that new forms of academic publishing are tied to global economic changes that *require* new economic measures—to re-cast this sense as a need for a new affinity and new community. We do not deny the pressure on academic presses under the current economic conditions, but we assert that there are different forms of agency in this situation, different ways of making publishing a form of action. *The fact is that publishing is always in crisis.* The discourse on the economics of publishing reflects at least in part the dual status of the book as material object, on the one hand, and an intellectual and conceptual form on the other (Savikas' format and form). This dual status always thematizes the crisis of the book vis a vis its materiality, a crisis theme that always plays out in terms of institutions and capitalizations in and around the book. The crisis today is set in terms of competing rhetorics of austerity and solidarity.

The first emphasizes the inexorability of the economic situation, where the only solution is cutbacks and sequestrations. Solidarity is quite different: it means new affinities and new communities. We may choose to “go digital” as publishers both because of and in spite of the new economies. Our essay first surveys past, present, and future practices in scholarly publishing on e-lit, and secondly turns to more theoretical and systematic concerns. But it is largely a look ahead and a hope for the future.

### Academic Discourse on e-lit: A Survey

We will look at the self-definition of four leading scholarly book series publishing some works dealing with e-lit. Let us be clear: none of series present themselves as solely or even primarily concerned with e-lit. In fact, as we note, there is currently only one scholarly book series solely devoted to e-lit—the Computing Literature series at West Virginia University.

Our first example, the Electronic Mediations<sup>2</sup> series from the University of Minnesota Press, has published works such as Roberto Simanowski's *Digital Art and Meaning*, Rita Raley's *Tactical Media*, and Terry Harpold's *Ex-Foliations*, all of which deal at least in part with e-lit. At the same time, the series includes works in no way dealing with e-lit, for example: Peter Krapp's *Deja Vu*, which deals with the “pitfalls of cultural memory and forgetting”; and *Games of Empire*, on “Global Capitalism and Video Games,” which is edited by Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter. The series defines itself as concerned with the way “electronically mediated communication has established lasting and significant changes in society and culture, politics and

S: I think of this as a choice - we reflect on this in greater more detail in the essay - a choice to take control of of e-lit scholarly publishing history and production ... Jean-Paul Sartre defined humanity “in relation to our commitments.”<sup>1</sup> The equation *book=crisis as driven by economics* is one that sees our commitments and choices dictated from outside. The alternative, that we create ebooks because of a new possibility - as you said so well, transcending literature beyond the technology of paper - says we do this to create new meanings and new affiliations (by affiliations I mean, new authorships, like this one here where we are writing to each other). Not to say that economics are not pressing, not to say there aren't economic crises, but rather it's a strategic question of how we decide on our acts.

T: Exactly. It's a matter of perspective. It is our choice to see our actions as either determined by outside situations (economic issues, access to certain programs, etc.) or to see our actions as pragmatic work with the resources available to us to create as you said, new meanings and affiliations. And, thinking back to Sartre's arguments: we have the freedom to make this choice.

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Basic Writings*. Routledge, 2001. 42.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/series/electronic-mediations>

economics, thinking and being.” All the works in the series are framed in a way that meets this definition. Even a text such as Simanowski’s, which includes “kinetic concrete poetry, computer-generated text, interactive installation, mapping art, and information sculpture” is presented under this overall framework—it is a work on cultural changes first and on electronic literature only second.

Our second example is the International Texts in Critical Media Aesthetics<sup>3</sup> series published by Bloomsbury Press’ Continuum imprint, and which includes such notable works as Christopher Funkhouser’s *New Directions in Digital Poetry*. Where the Electronic Mediations series pulls all its offerings in the direction of communication, this series categorizes them under “critical aesthetics.” It requires the texts to adopt a philosophical position “dedicated to the problem of how and whether technology as a medium for art and literature simultaneously makes reference to and differs from the use of more traditional media and methods for these expressive practices.” In short, the philosophical position determines the series—its works, its constitution—over the topics explored in individual works.

Thirdly, the University of Alabama Press’s Modern and Contemporary Poetics<sup>4</sup> has been a leading academic series for scholarship on today’s poetry, and has been open to discussing its development in digital formats. The series has published two of the most crucial books on digital poetry, Funkhouser’s *Prehistoric Digital Poetry* and Loss Glazier’s *Digital Poetics*. However, their publication is within the scope of a series not solely focused on digital poetry or e-lit works. These titles can be found next to works such as Andrew Lee DuBois’s Ashbery’s *Forms of Attention*, concerning the contribution of John Ashbery’s work to 20th century poetics, and Ron Silliman’s *The Alphabet*, composed of poetic fragments from the 1970s. Modern and Contemporary Poetics is broadly defined by poetry, fitting in digital poetry as a variant of the genre. The press has also published works such as David Ciccoricco’s *Reading Network Fiction*, which establishes network fiction as a category of e-lit. As not part of any series, Ciccoricco’s book shows that electronic literature remains heterogeneous and undefined for the University of Alabama Press.

The situation is similar in our final example, the MIT Press, which publishes works on e-lit within a series more broadly defined by and titled as New Media.<sup>5</sup> MIT Press’s New Media series has published works such as *New Media Reader*, a compilation of essays all relating to e-lit, edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort. However, the same series contains titles such as Steven E. Jones and George K. Thiruvathukal’s *Codename Revolution*, analyzing the Nintendo Wii platform. Also, MIT’s Leonardo<sup>6</sup> book series publishes works within the scope of Art and New Media, thinking of art in a larger sense. *New Media Poetics*, a crucial work on e-lit, is published within this series, along with works having little to no relation with e-lit.

§: Yes, so here’s what occurs to me right now: we’re creating - in this argument - a way of thinking about e-lit as an expression of this freedom in a contemporary world that often is presented to us as determining—or, at the least, the movements of crisis and austerity come to us as pressure from outside. By contrast and for example, how can we bring think about critical and creative scholarly publishing in a way that draws from the Occupy movement? (The FLOSS manuals and the Nettime digital publishing initiative are inspirations.) It is in scholarship, criticism, and publication about e-lit that this expression is made available in a reflexive form, a form that is pedagogically and epistemically conveyed and formalized. Also (end of this point): I think back to the title of our essay: “Editing Electronic Literature in the Global Publishing System.” Situating e-lit in a “global publishing system” begins—very minimally—to describe this system and argue for freedom/action/creativity within it, rather than just going with the flow, as it were. This is not the typical view of e-lit: more typically we consider it in terms of previous literary traditions or in terms of other forms of digital writing, but not in terms of a “global publishing system.”

3 <http://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/series/international-texts-in-critical-media-aesthetics/>

4 <http://www.uapress.ua.edu/Catalog/ProductSearch.aspx?ExtendedSearch=false&SearchOnLoad=true&rh1=Modern%20&%20Contemporary%20Poetics&sj=1114&rhdcid=1114>

5 <http://mitpress.mit.edu/disciplines/new-media>

6 <http://mitpress.mit.edu/books/series/leonardo-book-series>

What do these case studies mean for critical scholarship on e-lit? Of course, these book series will continue, but for there to be a discourse and growing field of electronic literature, there must be a place to incubate and disseminate critical scholarship that emphasizes e-lit as literature.

Our analysis of these examples is not to dismiss or disparage these series. Their contributions are unquestionable. Rather, we want to highlight the way the discursive framing of scholarly publications determines the field of statements possible to make about the works.

## Computing Literature

There are few examples of scholarly book series that directly address and define themselves through the term electronic literature. We propose that the Computing Literature book series is a significant imagining of the future critical discourse on e-lit. The series is published at the Center for Literary Computing at West Virginia University, in collaboration with the Laboratoire Paragraphe the University of Paris 8, and in a distribution agreement with the West Virginia University Press. The series is characterized by several things: the editing and composition are done by student workers; it is transmedial, that is, printed in a short run with an emphasis on ebook and other electronic formats; and finally it is based on close collaboration between the editorial team and the authors. None of this is unique to other book series current or past, nor is this necessarily a model for book publication. But the Computing Literature series is unique in taking electronic literature as its subject.

T: Computing Literature presents publication on and about e-lit as a creative movement. Ana Hatherly tracked the progression/development of e-lit works back to the Middle Ages. A creative work of e-lit incorporates freedom/action/creativity in the interaction it allows the user. The discourse around the work extends this experimentation. We would like to situate e-lit in a global publishing system that incorporates freedom/activity/creativity just as the works of e-lit, themselves, possess these qualities.

S: Hatherly describes literature as an activity happening across history—transhistorically—as expression of human creativity. She also describes it politically: for example, Portuguese poets responded to the dictatorship with works that satirized, exposed, and provided alternatives to the language/discourse of power. I see our critique of the GPS (Global Publishing System) as doing a similar maneuver. I think of it as “occupy publishing” in the sense of Occupy Wall Street. We are redistributing editorial decision-making and access to publication. Doing so involves short-circuiting the usual means of publication open to e-lit scholars and artists. It also involves the greater proximity of “academic” writing to creative writing, something we’re also exploring. (Or rather: it all goes together; the proximity of e-lit work and the academic writing is part of the collapse of boundaries that controlled who could do what, who could publish what ...)

Our aim in developing this series was to provide a place for authors to publish works within a framework specifically and solely focused on literature as it moves forward in digital media. We emphasize this to differentiate Computing Literature from other academic series. Where those publish critical scholarship on e-lit under a variety of frameworks, here electronic literature is the framework.

Secondly, our aim in developing the series was to create a space within critical scholarship that for the first time emphasizes the literary aspects of electronic literature. We see this as an experiment, in the sense that we cannot predict the way these publications will shape the field of electronic literature. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari remind us that to “think is to experiment,” adding that “experimentation is always that which is in the process of coming about—the new, remarkable, and interesting that replace the appearance of truth and are more demanding than it is.”<sup>7</sup> We wanted to create a series that insists on this demand of experimentation. Our sense of e-lit work as existing in an entire field of publication, as taking place both in the “original” creative work as well as in

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7 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *What is Philosophy?* Columbia University Press, 1994. 111.

the accompanying scholarship, means that the demand of experimentation is felt as an event located across all these sites—in some ways doing away with the distinction of original work and scholarly commentary.

In short, rather than allow other conceptual frameworks to determine the reception and categorization of electronic literature, we open the possibility that the field will grow as a literary force.

Consider the example of the upcoming book in the series, *Po.Ex: Essays from Portugal on Cyberliterature and Intermedia*. This is a collection of essays by Ana Hatherly, Ernesto Melo e Castro, and Pedro Barbosa, edited by Rui Torres and Sandy Baldwin, with editorial assistance by Tiffany Zerby and others. The three primary contributions of the book are as follows:

1. a historical model of e-lit within a continuum of avant-garde writing stretching back to the Middle Ages;
2. a hermeneutic model for finding meaning in electronic literature through intermediality;
3. and a semiotic model for the computer as the cybernetic extension of human creativity, and as an enabling medium for merging writers with readers as mutual authors (as wreaders).

For the purposes of our argument, these three models oppose the notion that e-lit is determined by the technologies and media that it appears in. *Po.Ex* proposes that experimental poetry, specifically visual and programmatic works, has a historical presence that does not rely on the availability of particular tools. As Hatherly brilliantly observed, “The same visual poetry exploded during the Baroque period, disappeared during the nineteenth century, and reemerged

transfigured in the twentieth century.”<sup>8</sup> Poets are driven to create and turn to technology as a tool for creation. It is too easy to slip into the view that the machines and devices of our world determine what we create. The lessons of *Po.Ex* make us recognize the trajectory of literature as it uses media as a means for the emergence and extension of human intelligence. In Pedro Barbosa’s words, the computer serves as “an extension of human intellectual work (a machine, actually, is always the extension of any sector of human activity); and hence it allows the scientist, as well as the artist, to perform more complex operations than he/she would be able to perform without this new technological prosthesis.”<sup>9</sup>

Firstly, then, the contents of *Po.Ex* argue for scholarly publishing on e-lit as driven by a partnership of critical and creative goals, combined with an expansive view of the history of literature. This view of the literary use of media as a means of creative emergence relates to our earlier point that critical scholarship and creative works co-exist in a hybrid space, where the lines are blurred between previously separated media technologies. As distinctions between composition, publication, and distribution break down, so too does literary invention come to take place across the entire process of creating a book. Secondly, and equally important, the essays forming the book are drawn from a FEDER (COMPETE) and FCT (MCTES) project and already exist in a database. In this sense, the book is a kind of remix. The executive editors of the book actively selected and shaped the con-

T: Yes we are proposing that e-lit be thought of as the entirety of the field, the critical discourse found in academic writing, as well as the e-lit works. Dissolving these boundaries would make the GPS more free, and it would acknowledge the presence of creative acts that may have gone unnoticed.

S: I really like that last point. Yes, creativity becomes visible. I think your first sentence is important for me: e-lit as the entirety of the field means that the boundaries are already fallen, we just aren’t always able to see this fact - again, it’s a question of seizing our freedom, deciding to act. To see the field and the lack of boundaries is precisely to acknowledge this continuum of creativity and critical discourse.

<sup>8</sup> Hatherly, Ana. “From the House of the Muses.” *Po-Ex*. Center for Literary Computing, Morgantown: 2013 (forthcoming).

<sup>9</sup> Barbosa, Pedro. “Towards a Theory of Computer Generated Text.” *Po-Ex*. Center for Literary Computing, Morgantown: 2013 (forthcoming).

tents in consultation with the authors. The writers—poets active since the 1960's—entered into a critical dialogue with editors 50 years later. Also, the editorial team—the copyeditors, the designers, the layout and composition team—work directly with the editors and—to a degree—with the authors. Moreover, this team is highly mobile, moving between these tasks and always interacting with the text, and distributed, situated both in Portugal and America. In addition, since these writings are appearing in translation for the first time, the editorial team takes an active role in representing the original texts in publishable English. We recognize that book publication is always a collaboration, that there are always negotiations and exchanges between authors and editors throughout the process, and so on. However, our point is that this fluid and mobile approach is part of a strategy to foreground the literary as it emerges in the new global publishing system, and production of *Po.Ex* is an act of collaboration between critics and artists. The boundaries between authorship and editorial work are fluid and permeable.

The contribution of this book is both its content and the process surrounding its development. The essays it contains demonstrably shaped the field of e-lit, especially in Europe. For example, the poet and scholar Philippe Bootz attests to the influence of Barbosa's writing on his theories of the lability of text and on the virtualization of the role of reader and writer. At the same time, the influence of these essays is limited because new generations of artists, critics, and students of e-lit do not have access to the works. Many of these works are out of print and *Po.Ex* is the first English language translation of any of these texts. The non-availability of works such as these renders works already in English quasi-canonical—simply put, e-lit is narrowly defined in the Anglo-American academic context in large part because of the limited range of available critical works.

### **Fitting e-lit into Academic Publishing: Webtakes and Epubs**

We recognize a long history of the synthesis of the critical and creative works. Think of Marshall McLuhan's collaborations with Quentin Fiore—and this is only one well-known recent instance. Today's ebook market encourages flexible and inventive approaches to publishing. Kickstarter or—in a different way—Lulu allow anyone to publish. Moreover, prior to the widespread emergence of ebooks, scholarly publishers made other attempts to link critical and creative works together. One well-known attempt was made when MIT Press published N. Katherine Hayles's *Writing Machines*<sup>10</sup>—which explored the relation between literature and technology—while simultaneously publishing Erik Loyer's "webtake"<sup>11</sup> of the work. Loyer, a well-known e-lit author, created this representation of *Writing Machines* using the Adobe Flash program and included features similar to those found in e-lit works: text, visual graphics, and interactive options for the user. MIT press published the "webtake" on a webpage titled "*Writing Machines* Web Supplement" and linked it directly from the page it used to sell the book to the public. In this way, the webtake became part of how the book was presented, a clear decision made by the publisher. A book on the intersection of literature and technology in turn became the technological intersection of yet more (e-)literature.

Was *Writing Machines* simply a one-off experiment? There were several other webtakes in the MIT series but the publisher apparently abandoned the approach. Our point is rather the implication for e-lit scholarship—here the web take can be seen as having a longer-term impact. The proximity of the academic work and Loyer's supplement was a paradigm for a new ecology of scholarship, with a reflexive relationship between scholarship and creative exploration. The literal proximity of the books on the MIT website, next to each other on the same webpage, displayed the entry of scholarship into the same space as creative work, and vice versa. Both objects were pulled and reformed in relation to their other: Hayles' book played with voice and typography, Loyer's Flash offers a critical summary and meditation on Hayles' argument. Loyer is one of the best known e-lit authors, here offering a scholarly treatise; Hayles' is certainly the best known e-lit critic, here offering a creative turn in her work, one that is evident but never dominant in her later works. Loyer's work was not directly discussed in Hayles' book but

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10 <http://mitpress.mit.edu/books/writing-machines>

11 [http://mitpress.mit.edu/sites/default/files/titles/content/mediawork/titles/writing/writing\\_webtake.html](http://mitpress.mit.edu/sites/default/files/titles/content/mediawork/titles/writing/writing_webtake.html)

was certainly part of the field under discussion. Both book and web take were morphed hybrids, topologically drawn from the critical to the creative or from the creative to the critical.

Think of this publication as an event that suggested one possible future direction for the field of e-lit publishing. The impact of this event is latent, uncharted, and still being dealt with. The publishing field continues to present works of e-lit scholarship quite distinct from their subject matter, despite the fact that the scholarship is now part of the same media ecology. In fact, there are many such events, many hybridizations of scholarship and art. Many e-lit practitioners publish scholarly works, often in ways that subvert and divert the genre into more creative spaces. But the fact remains that the field of academic publishing is relatively untouched by the medial proximity of e-lit scholarship to its object.

There are other explorations of the hybrid new media space between criticism and creative work. The *Vectors* multimedia journal at the University of Southern California is a notably example, and of course Erik Loyer is part of *Vectors*. While we are surprised that there are not more and varied examples of such work in the e-lit field, the lines of connection increase year by year.

The most immediate and obvious is the spread of ebooks and digital publishing. If we recognize that the act of publishing a book today is in effect to publish electronically, it is also true that the ebook is where this fact is being most directly taken up by academic publishers. Yet, ebooks and electronic publishing by academic presses can at best be described as an unevenly distributed practice. The diverse ways academic presses embrace or distance themselves from ebooks and digital publications are partial indicators of the ways scholarly publishing is transformed in the new media ecology. In the following, we read across examples from several academic presses.

### **Marketing of ebooks in Academic Publishing: a Survey**

In the good old deconstructive sense, the supplement is in a productive yet troubling relationship with the origin or source. The web supplement would similarly seem to displace the priority of the printed scholarly work for smoother and more distributed set of discourses in many media, all moving around related concerns. As the presence of text has shifted from strictly hard-copy to electronic, books are offered in both print and digital formats. There is even a shift in the digital formats of these texts. The time is past for us to label these as the book's "web supplement." Instead, we look to "enhanced ebooks," where ebooks utilize their medium's capability to hyperlink, play video or audio, or share information across different platforms. The ebooks are moving from linear text, closely resembling the printed copy, to an interactive representation of text, audio, and video, more closely resembling works of e-lit. The enhanced book can include interactive elements that range from the ability to comment to the ability to "like" the book on Facebook. Readers can navigate through the text, open links to relevant pictures or referenced works, or even listen to an accompanying soundtrack. The possibilities are even more elaborate. Consider the examples as diverse as Amaranth Borsuk's augmented book *From Page to Screen* and the supplementation of Jay-Z's biography *Decoded* as part of the an ad campaign by the Bing search engine. Neither are quite ebooks in the conventional sense, both are troubling and productive supplements to the book. Yet relatively few academic ebooks take the direction of the enhanced book. Instead of a supplementary relation, academic ebooks attempt to be the book in another format, and often succeed poorly at this.

Still, the question remains of the role ebooks they play in the overall presentation of the work. How should presses present ebooks in relation to the printed copy? We do not claim to answer this question. We recognize the different approaches scholarly publishers take, and we acknowledge that there is no consensus or accepted convention for handling this. A survey of the place of ebooks in current scholarly publishing on e-lit shows a great deal of unevenness.

MIT Press has a whole website dedicated to the ebook versions of its publications, "Ebooks at the MIT Press,"<sup>12</sup>

but this is separated from the general presentation of the works. If you search for a title within the press's main website you may be able to buy a hardcover or paperback book but there is no ebook option linking to the ebooks site. This disconnect suggests that the ebooks are treated as a separate entity.

The University of Minnesota Press does not offer direct access to ebooks through their website. There is an "about ebooks" option below the paperback and hardcover prices for books, such as Simanowski's *Digital Art and Meaning*<sup>13</sup> and Raley's *Tactical Media*.<sup>14</sup> However, this link only brings up a message suggesting that for digital editions the viewer should "visit their preferred venue directly." It includes links to the main pages of Amazon Kindle and Google ebookstore Bookshare, but the user must search from the main page in order to track down the book he/she had previously been viewing. There is a disconnect here as well—the press does not allow the ebook and printed copies to be marketed in close proximity to each other on their website, and the venues at which the ebook can be found (Amazon Kindle, Google ebook Bookshare) market ebooks specifically. Once again, the ebooks are treated as separate entities from the printed copy, with the acknowledgement that there is some relation (the "about ebooks" option).

In contrast, the University of Alabama Press offers access to ebooks on its website right next to hardback and paper copies, where both formats can be ordered. But, this is only for certain titles. The majority of the Modern and Contemporary Poetics series is not available in ebook format through the press's website, and no link is provided to access them through any online retailers. Therefore, the marketing of ebooks through the University of Alabama Press is not entirely evident. It seems to employ a mixture of approaches—marketing the ebook in very close proximity to the printed copy, or alternatively, marketing only the printed copy. There are several possible reasons for this. The lack of ebooks for some titles could be happenstance or the result of uncomplete plans for ebook conversion. Or, the inclusion of ebooks for some titles could be a movement, on behalf of the Press, to begin marketing the electronic and print editions together.

Bloomsbury Press's International Texts in Critical Media Aesthetics series exhibits some similarities in its approach to both University of Alabama Press's Modern and Contemporary Poetics and University of Minnesota Press's Electronic Mediations Series. Some of the titles are only offered in hardback, some are only offered in paperback, and some are only offered as pdf or epub ebooks. These options are presented in the same location on the website—in close proximity to each other—and the prices are provided for each. However, when you click on the "buy" button under the ebook option, it offers links to Barnes & Noble, Amazon Kindle, Kobo, Google Play, and Apple. By linking to outside retailers for the actual purchase of the ebook editions—as we have established that University of Minnesota does as well—the press is creating an obvious distinction between the ebook and printed copy. Bloomsbury Press is marketing ebooks and printed copies together on their actual website, but they are also marketing them separately at the time of purchase.

Collectively, these case studies show that scholarly publishers take different approaches to marketing and representing ebooks, with no definitive consensus among these presses about how they should be handled. But, how can such consensus be made if there is not adequate research to back up the "best" option? How must the ebooks be marketed so that viewers see them as equal to or enhanced from the traditional printed copy? If the ebook does include certain enhanced features—such as hyperlinks, multimedia content, etc.—should they be listed right there on the website with the ability to preview?

### **Scholarly Publishing as Critical Action: Theoretical and Systemic Considerations**

Ebook software, apps, etc. provide interactive capabilities and ways for the reader to navigate the text (i.e. highlighting, commenting, bookmarking). How much of this rests in the software, ebook platforms, or companion apps? How much of this rests in the ebooks itself? Can we make a distinction between the interactivity of the

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13 <http://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/digital-art-and-meaning>

14 <http://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/tactical-media>

format and the interactions with the particular artifact? Can such a distinction even be entertained, when every work is both limited and defined by the medium in which it operates? Would this suggest that if ebooks retain the format of the printed work with very few changes, they are not making the most of fully utilizing the capabilities of the digital platform? That is—as we see many ebooks continue to stay close to the format of the printed copy—are publishers and authors *obliged* to utilize these capabilities?

Our point is that this is a basic question of literature: the difference between the capacities of medium and the uniqueness of the work itself. Consider the way electronic literature is structured in relation to criticism. E-lit works and the critical discourse on e-lit are coupled around new systems of writing and publishing. From opening acts of composition using word processing software to the terminal stages of digital publishing, to commenting and pedagogics through blogs and journals—through all these stages—we recognize that critical and creative writing is part of a single toolchain. Such a coupling of literature and criticism across a technical continuum problematizes the assumed autonomy of literature, as well as problematizes any easy distinction between the medium and the artifact. In Luhmann's system theory, society is composed of structurally-coupled but closed functional systems. For Luhmann, literature is functionally closed. The implication for artistic practice is the definition of the artist as the creator of the work. A notion of invention or poetics is basic to what we mean by art.

Our fundamental claim in pointing to the uneven shifts in scholarly publishing on e-lit is that the differentiating distinction between artistic production and critical discourse is now shifted; the difference made by artwork—its poetics—is systematically linked to critical discourse. How do critical and creative communities recognize the implication of critical discourse within the closure of creative practices?

Criticism recognizes an unstable and contingent element to its object. Because of the poetics of art and because of the contingent and non-communicative nature of the artwork, the critic must think along with the artist. To some degree, e-lit criticism can only describe the creative works, commenting on their appearance and contingency. Even such description provides reflection on the place of the works in the new system of writing and publishing. The relation goes in both directions. The artist's orientation towards criticism is critical—it involves making distinctions that situate the work in relation to critical discourse. Art becomes an answer to the field of statements created by the critics.

Critical scholarly discourse is not an external irritant to its subject, artistic works. Rather, critical scholarly discourse on e-lit comes to terms with what e-lit wants. "Comes to terms" means finding the terminology, the concepts, the lineages, and the arguments to situate the works themselves. "Comes to terms" also means that the critical scholarly discourse moves at a different speed and with different aggregations than the works of e-lit. A simple view of this coming to terms is the production of essays and books to deal with electronic literature. Such production is different in scope, involvement by the reader, and economy than the production of the works themselves, but it is part of the same larger ecology of discourse and media. Moreover, it is important to note that the predominance of artist-practitioners in the e-lit field means that these functions are often contained in a single person. As a community, electronic literature produces, consumes, and discourses on itself.

The proximity between literature and criticism has always been a fact, but it is transformed and intensified by new media. One obvious fact about the tradition of literary criticism is that it exists in the same medium as its subject. This is a historical fact: literary criticism emerges within the age of print. Leaving aside pre-print antecedents such as Aristotle's *Poetics*, we can see that criticism became possible as a commentary on printed books for print-literate audiences. That literary criticism exists in the same medium as its subject is also a material fact: books of literary criticism are materially the same as the literary books they criticize, made from the same wood pulp and stock and ink, published by the same publishers, printed by the same printers, and so on.

It is also a discursive fact: literary criticism and its literary subject involve the same field of concepts and terms within the same discursive sphere and within the same linguistic tools. Simply put: the word "poem" references the same object in a book of poetry and in a book of criticism, even if the former is a collection and presenta-

tion of the poem, while the latter is a commentary and critique of the poem. This materiality bolsters the shared reference, building aesthetic ambiguity and depth of reception. The notion that scholars “read” a literary work presupposed a systematic and reflexive relation built on the common medium.

The obviousness of this fact is the obviousness of media ecology in general. Literature’s privileged place in the humanities rested on its creative leveraging of the medium other humanities disciplines used for communication purposes. The aesthetic principles of literary criticism—the presumption that the critic responds to the affect, the language, the cultural milieu, or all the rest that is implied in a literary work—all this builds on the shared medi-ality of criticism and its object, shared in terms of a common material continuum. The critic feels what the poem felt because both work with and in language. A simple proof is the fact that the critic can cite the poem to make a critical point as well as—and at the same time as—to repeat the poetical effect of the original.

The condition is different in other media economies. Botanists and musicians, nuclear engineers and criminal psychologists, all write about an object that is outside the text, which presumes a medial difference that is always present and is a condition of their discourse. They have a distance that is not separable from the conditions of truth and facticity in their discourse, just as the lack of distance is the condition of critical practice in literature. This difference may be problematized in various ways—we might claim, deconstructively, that these disciplines can only write about what is already writable in their field—but the point is the undeniable media ecology already in place with literary criticism and literature.

The condition is different with e-lit. The relation between critic and work is changed. Each of us has faced and responded to the question of defining e-lit, and to the resistance to including it within the field of literature. We propose that this familiar though variable disciplinary resistance is tied to the medial move away from print. The common query “is it literature?” is obviously tied to the fact that e-lit is no longer in print, which is a way of saying that it no longer appears in the same medium as criticism. A separation is where there was none before. The second part is not as often recognized by scholars: the resistance to and problem posed by e-lit is as much that criticism is not in electronic form as it is that e-lit is electronic. The criticism is not *like* the work and cannot handle the work in a common medial relation. “Obvious” is what is taken for granted, and the obvious is lost with e-lit, at least for literary criticism. The obvious aesthetic relation between criticism and its object is broken or at least problematized.

Of course, we know that this situation was never stable. There was never time where the medial relation between criticism and literature was settled once and for all.

What happens as criticism is understood to be “native” to the computer? Of course, today we all write with word processors and many of us will publish our critical writing on the web before it appears in print: on a blog, in an email, as a conference proceeding (like this one!), and so on. The larger point is that the critical work is now born-digital in the same way as the e-lit work. This means that presentations at e-lit conferences, such as this one, can include hyperlinks, video, and the like.

Beyond this, we see a larger medial point. We should accept that all books are ebooks—all books are written electronically—and some just happen to be in print. The media ecology is reconfigured so that criticism is once more in the same field as the work, a field that is now the computer and the internet. The institutional existence and recognition of a field of e-lit creative practice and critical scholarship is contingent on a renewed medial linkage. The scholarly ebook is like the creative work it criticizes. “Like” is metaphoric and medial. What is the significance of this likeness? The challenge is for scholars to catch up to this fact.

Scholarly criticism on e-lit is released in ebook formats and can, in principle if not in practice, be tightly linked to the work it criticizes. It may even be in exactly the same platform or software as the work. We are not specifically thinking of hybrid works of creative scholarship or critical e-lit, though these may be one answer to the challenge. Think of the way Talan Memmett’s *Lexia to Perplexia* involves both a philosophical and creative

engagement with the medium, or the way Alan Sondheim's *Internet Text* problematizes plain text, suggesting a performativity or execution taking place at some other level.

Our question is more general and aimed at the disciplinary conjunction of e-lit as a creative practice and as a field of scholarship. What happens to the overall practice of scholarly publishing when it is so tightly and intermedially bound to its subject? To be clear: we do not claim to offer the answers to this question, but see it as a pressing question for the field.

We reformulate the question as follows: e-lit does not currently know what it wants. Historically, the movements of postmodern narrative or language poetry—for example—came with very explicit theoretical claims and cultural agendas. These movements insisted on their radical and revisionary role in terms of previous arts and in terms of the critical discourse on these arts. Broadly speaking, such movements were set against a notion of traditional artistic practice. In this notion, the very possibility of art insisted on autonomy of the artistic object and of the community of artists. Of course, it was always possible to show a commerce and communication between writers and society, to show the habitus or oppositional role of art, but this was discovered reflexively and against the self-conception of the artists. In short, modernism insisted that art both plunder and separate itself from the communicative practices dominating society. The point is simply that modernism presumed a separation and stratification of art as against other forms of discourse. The radical and revisionary experimentalism of language poetry and postmodern narrative were forcible attacks on this traditional view of art.

The obvious answer is refusal of determinism, refusing to allow this connection between the medium and the artwork to contain or co-opt us. In contrast to the modernist aesthetic, there are no “proper” interfaces or proper uses of technology which e-lit hijacks to make its art. E-lit is always already there, in the same space as all the other components and functions of the computer and the network. The modernist notion claims the literary would see the presentation of surreal work using Flash as involving stratification, where the work of electronic literature does something other with the literalness of the interface. We see something different in the flat, high-speed space of

S: Do our devices determine what we make? I can never decide. What do you think?

T: I think the advancements in what we are able to create are unquestionable, but to me, the creation still belongs to the author.

S: That makes me think of how we know what belongs to the author when a computer adds or collaborates ... is the computer a/ the author as well?

T: That's another great question. I think it really depends on how we define an author. Does the author need to produce the material from thin air, so to say? Or be human? On one hand, the computer needs inputted text or direction.

S: Makes sense. It's a well-known claim about the computer: we act, we do things of our own; a computer only acts as it is programmed to; it doesn't create anything. That's the difference. I guess that technological determinism is the idea that the machine does “act” in some way.

T: I agree. We humans have determined our technology, created it, programmed it, etc. I think our works can be shaped by the technology we decide to use, but it is within our power to use it, provide direction, introduce text/code, etc.

S: Makes me think again of existentialism and Sartre: he said that the human condition is freedom, we are fundamentally free; but we have to choose our freedom, we have to act, otherwise we remain as if we were unfree, we act as if we are determined by our institutions, our machines, etc.

T: Yes I do see your connection. Just as we have created our technology, we also decide how much we rely on these tools. If we act as though we are unable to be free, or incapable of creating without the computer / a program, we are restricting or limiting ourselves away from the possibilities of the future. And, in a way, disregarding our past.

contemporary digital writing and publishing: a relation of mutual inhabitation and co-parasitism. We refuse to see a dominant interface or technical system in which the artist carves out her works. Such a view continues the notion of autonomous art as oppositional, working with tools of the system.

While the accepted histories of electronic literature set it in parallel with such experimental writing, it is clear that e-lit does not come packaged with a clear theoretical claim or cultural agenda. There are individual exceptions among artists and critics, but the e-lit community is not unified by a radical, revisionary role. It may be that every e-lit artist and critic takes on the mantle of experimentation and revision, but there is no overarching ideology or method or even mission to e-lit. The field insists on a plurality and on a minimalization of theoretical claims. e-lit is innocent. There are understandable reasons for this. A great deal of effort in the field over the last decades has been devoted to creating a basic recognition of the work on the part of the broader public. The ELO's definition of e-lit art and the range of the organization's publications are evidence of this: they establish the existence of the works; they argue for their literary significance through the broadest possible definition; they focus on archiving and preservation; and so on. All this is laudable and the reasons are understandable. The work and its production drive the field, de-coupled from critical agendas.

In absence of a critical agenda, electronic literature will remain tied to technical products and the network. Of course, this is tremendously exciting: any conceivable expressive medium is potentially a site for electronic literature. New media are rapidly worked over by e-lit writers; but this also means that the artwork is inseparable from technical exigencies of the media. Until e-lit decides on what it wants, its past, present, and future will always be bound to problems such as: bandwidth; preservation (we all know the problems of displaying early Hypercard-based e-lit); software upgrades; plugin availability, and all the rest. In short, under such conditions, we cannot conceive of e-lit—it does not exist—without the computer and the network. This is no doubt obvious, but it situates the field within the global publishing system: e-lit is constituted with and against this system. The task of a critical editorial practice is to take an active hand in this situation.





