

# ELECTRONIC LITERATURE PUBLISHING PRACTICES: DISTINCT TRADITIONS AND COLLABORATING COMMUNITIES

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## ***THE SURVEY OF ELECTRONIC LITERATURE PUBLISHING AND DISTRIBUTION IN EUROPE: AN INTRODUCTION***

*I*n this chapter, the findings and outcomes of the report on Electronic Literature Publishing and Distribution in Europe and related seminar, held at the University of Jyväskylä in March 2011, are summarized and discussed.<sup>2</sup> In the survey, electronic literature refers to “works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer.” In this definition, it is significant that both digitized print literature and print-like digital literature—so-called e-books—are excluded. There are essential similarities in the cultural and commercial status of electronic literature in the thirty European countries<sup>3</sup> this survey managed to cover. It is possible that some major players in the field may be missing, but it is unlikely that their forms of networked publishing practices would constitute a major counter-example to the findings presented here.

This survey covers most of Europe. The three main borderline areas are Russia, the Ukraine, and some newly independent countries in the Balkans. Russia is partly covered through an additional resource (Fedorova 2012, 122-124).

As there are no systematically gathered materials on the topic preexisting, the report is by necessity partly a historical account of the development of the electronic literature scene in various European countries. We are, however, concentrating here on the publication processes and procedures of electronic literature and not writing the history of European electronic literature. That would be

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<sup>2</sup> The report, authored by Markku Eskelinen and Giovanna di Rosario, is included in this volume.

<sup>3</sup> Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

a major task in itself, and there is an attempt at such history (or rather, histories) ongoing in the *Cybertext Yearbook*,<sup>4</sup> where articles on the histories of Catalan, Croatian, German, Polish, Russian, and Slovene electronic literature have been published so far. Christopher Funkhouser's (2007) *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: An Archaeology of Forms* is an important account of the early forms of electronic literature. The ELMCIP Knowledge Base, in future, may also serve to present a thorough account of the European (but also global) electronic literatures.

## **MAIN FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS FROM THE REPORT**

When starting the survey on the publishing institutions and processes of electronic literature in Europe, it soon became evident that the general rule in the field is an author's noncommercial self-publication and its somewhat more institutionalized form: publications of a literary group (such as Perfokarta in Poland or Infolipo in Switzerland) that sooner or later may find their way into more inclusive portals and occasionally to online journals as well. Multimedia literary works are sometimes commercially published on CDs and DVDs, but, beyond these, electronic literature is clearly a community and not a market-driven scene.

Outside France and its history of online and offline literary journals publishing electronic literature (ever since the Minitel/teletext era and *Art-Accès* in the mid-1980s), we did not come across a single review or journal that was designed solely for publishing electronic literature. It is much more typical that e-lit is published together with scholarly papers, net art, or digitized literature, especially with sound, visual, and concrete poetry.

There are several different patterns in e-lit publishing and distribution in Europe. In a few countries, there does not seem to be electronic literature at all (Romania, Greece, and Luxemburg). In the former Eastern Europe except Poland (Hungary, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia), in the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), and in the former Yugoslavia (Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia), as well as in Iceland and Ireland, authors' self-publications existed, but national portals were not found. Surprisingly, the pattern was the same in Italy, although an extensive database on Italian experimental literature including electronic literature is well on its way. In the Nordic countries (except Sweden and Iceland), we find the combination of regional and international portals and

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4 <<http://cybertext.hum.jyu.fi>>.

authors' websites. As the scope of the regional Elinor portal covers Sweden, too, we can include it in the same pattern as its Nordic neighbors.

Almost self-evidently, the biggest European nations and languages dominate, although there are important differences within this group of six languages and language areas. They are, in population size and the amount of native speakers, respectively: English, French, German, Spanish, Polish, Italian. The major portals, the most important reviews, the few commercial publications, the e-lit collections, and almost every competition take place in these languages. The main positive anomalies outside this sphere are easy to list: Slovenia (close ties between electronic literature and new media art); Portugal (one major review); Norway (one competition and regional portal); and Finland (one major international portal and several translated works of electronic literature).

There are five main characteristics of e-lit publishing and distribution in Europe. First, with very few exceptions, e-lit does not constitute a commercial, but instead a community-centered, activity. Second, most e-lit that satisfies the criteria used in this survey is freely accessible or downloadable on the Internet. Third, as electronic literature is often seen and situates itself in the continuum of twentieth century experimental and avant-garde literature, it is culturally in the margins of more mainstream literary practices or even completely separated from them. Fourth, the ongoing technological changes in the commercial publishing world, including, for example, the competition among publishers, teleoperators, bookstores, and hardware and software manufactures over the digital marketing and distribution channels of literature (e.g. portable reading devices such as Kindle and tablet computers such as iPad), do not yet seem to be closing the gap between electronic literature and mainstream literary practices. Fifth, institutionally, various e-lit communities are supported by or intertwined with, if anything, either the academic (creative writing programs, scholar-authors, presentations at conferences, etc.) or the art world (museums and galleries that may or may not get public funding).

The lack of commercial publications and publishers effectively decentralizes the scene and leaves e-lit authors with three basic types of publication possibilities: self-publication, publication in portals if such structures exist (in many ways and cases this is just a form of networked self-publication), and publication in e-lit journals. Two additional options are only available to some authors: museums and galleries prefer works that are as much literature as visual arts (e.g. text-

based installations, textual sculptures, kinetic and holographic works, digital multimedia). Publications in e-lit collections such as the two existing Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) ones in the US seem to be something that may happen in major European languages later in this decade. *The ELMCIP Anthology of European Electronic Literature* (edited by Maria Engberg, Talan Memmott, and David Prater), primarily designed as a pedagogical tool, with its eighteen works in ten languages, leads the way on this front.

It is evident that electronic literature is not a market-driven literary phenomenon but a community-driven scene with an accompanying set of aesthetic, social, and cultural values and practices. Although e-lit is isolated from most of the trends and concerns of mainstream publishing industries, it is close to and sometimes almost inseparable from other literary avant-gardes that are using the variety of non-digital media. In this respect, its cultural position could be described as a hyper-niche (a niche within a niche). Quite ironically, this exemption from media attention and monetary exchange and the strong emphasis on aesthetic and social motivation may go a long way to guarantee the creativity of these communities, especially as literary canons, editorial constraints, stable publishing structures, production and distribution costs, and copyright laws do not play a decisive or inhibiting role in most e-lit activities. At the same time, they do not play an enabling role in cases requiring marketing or other support which may also limit the field of innovations.

Electronic poetry, however, with its many forms, genres, practices, and venues seems to be an exception. The production numbers of e-poetry are on a level that is capable of supporting and justifying the existence of several reviews, journals, and both national and international competitions. It has a long and diverse history that merits collecting; some of its intermedial forms can be circulated and presented in nonliterary contexts; and, last but not least, e-poetry in this century constitutes a truly international scene of writing. In fact, one may even ask if there is electronic literature outside e-poetry anymore. Even if the activity would be strongly focused on e-poetry, that should not be a problem. After all, poetry is culturally and institutionally defensible, supportable, and expandable as literature or art, or both.

## REFLECTIONS ON THE SURVEY

As part of the E-lit Publishing survey, an interim version of the report was presented and discussed in the ELMCIP Seminar at the University of Jyväskylä in March 2011. In addition to the ELMCIP researchers, several external experts were invited to give feedback to the process.<sup>5</sup> As community-driven publication activity, electronic literature publishing has not taken any clear stance towards open access or the free and open source software (FOSS) movements as Kai Ekholm, the Director of the Finnish National Library, noted in his comment to the report. Some of the authors have employed Creative Commons (CC) licensing, and, most notably, CC licensing has been adopted by the ELO Collections and the *ELMCIP Anthology Of European Electronic Literature*. This may be seen as a shortcoming, a lack of respect towards the value of one's own (or one's own reference group's) creative work and potential interest outside of the direct circle of acquaintances and colleagues. There might be need for education in intellectual property rights issues for electronic literature authors and publishers. On the other hand, it may as well be that the lack of interest towards intellectual property rights is related to the nature of e-lit works, which are often not classifiable as stable and well-defined "works."

Promoting open source practices would bear important advantages for the long-term accessibility of e-lit productions. Keeping the source code open would significantly improve possibilities for migrating the works to new platforms and would thus improve their accessibility. Open source code would also allow better chances for derivative works, which, in a community-oriented activity, is an important avenue for new creations.<sup>6</sup>

Mark Marino raised the question of the usefulness of nationality-based divisions in the "postnational era." While it is certainly worth giving future consideration to the need to maintain and foster national divisions in the e-lit publishing world, it is very much in evidence that in Europe there are distinct electronic literature traditions based on nationality and language. Not

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5 Invited guests were Philippe Bootz, Laura Borràs, Nia Davies, Kai Ekholm (could not attend but sent e-mail comments), Peggy Hughes, George P. Landow, Mark Marino, Marko Niemi, and Beat Suter. The presentations and discussions can be viewed at the ELMCIP Vimeo repository.

6 A case in point would be Nick Montfort's poem generator *Taroko Gorge*, modified first by Scott Rettberg as *Tokyo Garage* and with several additional modifications up to this date.

only that, but regional emphases are visible in that there are regional funds to support electronic literature writing and publishing. The most noteworthy example of this is the Viñaros Electronic Literature Prize, funded by the Spanish city of Viñaros.

The methodological choices in the report do lead to certain favored approaches. There is a tendency to look for national lineages, i.e. how certain traditions are formed and passed along. Whereas this is a necessary step in understanding the larger picture of electronic literature publishing in Europe, it may have the consequence of excluding some more independent and more extreme cases from the account. This is certainly a genuine concern for a study within the framework of “creativity and innovation in practice,” if the most innovative practitioners are either not recognized (because they are not part of the lineages) or not accepted into the account (because they are seen as “something else”). This may also be the nature of community-centered action more generally. Once the electronic literature community has taken its form, it reinforces certain definitions of what is understood as proper electronic literature. To quite a large extent, this problem is tackled through the acknowledgement that electronic literature is brought together through several communities, a situation which is addressed in the report (opening the survey towards the visual arts and gallery presentation-oriented authors, for example, or discussing at length the omission of MOO and interactive fiction from the survey) so that there is not just one monolithic e-lit community but a congregation of differently oriented subgroups.

What is, and what is not, electronic literature, then? The so-called digital life, or digital life writing, for example, in many cases borders literary creative writing practices found in electronic literature. Digital life writing is also another form of community-driven action. Inevitably, there will always be a gray area, where electronic literature ceases to be the dominant concept, and some other conceptualization will be more fruitful. It may be a question of framing; some of digital life writing probably is written with such artistic intentions that it should be counted as e-lit, whereas most of it is not. From the perspective of publishing, however, this should really not make a difference, as digital life writing is community-driven activity in a very similar way as e-lit publishing. One exception might be a small-scale commercial dimension in some life blogging through product placement and other advertisement.

One could also question, as Markku Eskelinen in the discussion did, if there even is such a thing as a global electronic literature scene as strong as the national traditions seem to be. Scholarship is a different matter, and the research field is more global (even though Asia is a bit apart from the scene), which may to some extent distort the image regarding creative work. There, the national traditions play a more important role. But the findings in the report, even if accepting the methodological bias favoring national/language divisions, quite strongly speak on behalf of the importance of national scene versus global e-lit scene.

Translation, then, is a crucial question. As Nia Davies from the organization Literature across Frontiers<sup>7</sup> (LaF) reminded, lack of translations is a big challenge already in print literature (especially so in the Anglo-American world), which is one of the main motivations behind LaF to begin with. With e-lit, the challenge is even harder, with less funding, less resources, and with the added technical complexities. One of LaF's main modes of work is to arrange translation workshops, and that is something which the electronic literature community should also foster. First steps towards this have already been taken with the Translating E-literature Conference arranged by the University of Paris on June 8, 2012.

## ***NEW PLATFORMS, NEW DISTRIBUTION MODELS***

Electronic literature and, especially, related technologies are constantly developing. In the two years since the Publishing Electronic Literature in Europe seminar, we can already detect certain important changes. First of all, tablet devices and large touch screen smart phones have permeated the developed world. One can argue that these devices, for the first time, offer a proper platform to publish and experience electronic literature. Also, the content distribution services built for these devices, like Apple's AppStore, Android Market, or Windows Store, offer a possibility for small scale commercial distribution of works without the need to have a contract with a traditional publishing house.

So far, it seems that tablets and smart phones have been adopted more eagerly for publishing digitized literature—the revolution started by the Kindle

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<sup>7</sup> Literature Across Frontiers (LAF) is a European platform for literary exchange, translation and policy debate <<http://lafpublications.org/>>.

has led to a situation where reading of digital books is, for the first time, seriously challenging print literature. In the electronic literature scene, however, such a shift is not really detectable. The Hyperliterature Exchange,<sup>8</sup> a British site, promotes and encourages “the sale of hyperliterature—electronic literature, cyber-literature, hypertext, new media literature, nonlinear literature, digital poetry, Flash poetry, etc.” and has in its catalog digital fiction and poetry published by small publishers in France, Canada, Australia, and US, or by the authors themselves. As far as we can tell this enterprise is unique in Europe, and it, or something in similar vein, might develop into a Spotify or Netflix type of service for electronic literature.

One interesting example of the new type of electronic literature publishing comes from genre fiction, in this case science fiction. Best-selling sci-fi authors Neal Stephenson and Greg Bear, with a small group of fellow authors, started to publish a collaborative fiction titled *The Mongoliad* under the Subutai Corporation.<sup>9</sup> The work was serially published as chapters of a browser-based e-book or, alternatively, as additions to a mobile device applet through a system called Personal Ubiquitous Literature Platform (PULP). The work is multimedial in that the text chapters are accompanied by illustrations and video clips. Readers have to register to gain access to the content, and, with a subscription fee, it is possible to buy wider access to the contents as well as access to a higher degree in the community ranking. The readers are actively encouraged to provide feedback and even contribute their own content to the work itself (such as illustrations) or to the accompanying “Mongoliad Pedia”. Contributing to the Pedia is another way to proceed in the community ranking. This is an experiment relevant to e-lit publication as it is discussed here in many ways. Most importantly, science fiction is very much a community, a fandom-centered world. In *The Mongoliad*, a middle way between traditional publishing and purely amateur-driven fanzine publication is sought after. Also, the subscription-based access, with choices from free registration to institutional membership, provides a range of service comparable to many commercial online content vendors (from a limited free access to premium membership).

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8 There are 132 titles in the catalog (as of March 27, 2013), prices ranging from free to \$99.99 Canadian (for a CD ROM). There are also print books discussing e-lit included in the list. <<http://hyperex.co.uk/index.php>>.

9 <<https://mongoliad.com/>>.



Despite the near-professional design of *The Mongoliad*, the work is infested with bugs and incompatibility problems across platforms. Also, the community-driven action seems to have diminished quite soon after the initial excitement. *The Mongoliad* has also been published as a multi-volume print book (available also in Kindle edition) since 2012. It might be that the online *Mongoliad*, after all, ended up mainly as promotion for the print book. Pessimistically, one might see this as a failure despite there being an already formed readership available, even though it is too early to really say how the experiment ultimately will turn out. Optimistically, *The Mongoliad* could be seen as a symptom of more general interest in the kind of expanded writing e-lit is representing.

## **THE IMPACT OF ELMCIP**

The contribution of the ELMCIP Project and especially the launching of the ELMCIP Knowledge Base have already started making a difference in European e-lit publishing. What Simon Biggs (2010, 191–202) said about the situation of e-lit in the UK some years ago still holds true about e-lit in Europe:

It remains the case that whilst there are many artists and authors active in electronic literature in the UK, if you wish to access their work then you generally have to visit their personal websites. This means that the responsibility for the maintenance and dissemination of such artworks remains with the authors themselves.

The Knowledge Base and the *ELMCIP Anthology* are changing the situation. The Knowledge Base, at least in its current form, does not answer the challenge of long-term preservation of the works themselves, but, at least, there now is one place where a potential e-lit reader can find at least a big portion of European e-lit, if not all. The Knowledge Base, then, may also serve as a promotion channel for e-lit publishers.

The works selected for the *ELMCIP Anthology* are only a small fraction of the works written in Europe, but, at least for these works, the Anthology offers an additional archiving feature, not to mention the pedagogical materials attached to the Anthology, providing a new, educational publication of its own.

When it comes to building a comprehensive picture of electronic literature publishing and distribution in Europe, the survey discussed here serves as a starting point. All of the data gathered in the report is fully transferred to the ELMCIP Knowledge Base, and new information is added constantly. It is our

aim that in the future this kind of overview could be generated easily from the Knowledge Base without the need for laborious detective work as was the case with this report.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- *Establishing European E-Lit Awards.* Prior and existing e-lit awards and prizes have managed to bring visibility to e-lit and its authors, but the range of languages represented in any given prize has been highly limited. More open European E-Lit Awards could help bridge the nation-based e-lit communities.
- *Multilingual Anthologies.* The Anthologies serve to resolve, partially at least, the long-term preservation issue of e-lit, and they play an important pedagogical role as educational resources. The ELMCIP Anthology should be maintained and new volumes published regularly.
- *Translation Workshops.* Workshops would help to maintain the linguistic diversity of the European e-lit scene. They could be arranged in connection with the Anthology.
- *Including E-lit Works in Public and Academic Libraries.* Pilot projects could be established, for example, using the edited anthologies, where a library would provide additional information and support for readers interested in getting acquainted with e-lit.<sup>10</sup>
- *Establishing an International, Multilingual Online Journal that Focuses on E-lit and Publishing Translated Works.* Critical writing could also be published. Funding would be needed to ensure an up-to-date technical platform and long-term maintenance, to have at least one paid editor to provide professional quality, and, ideally, to pay writing fees for contributing authors.
- *Subscription Fee-Based Commercial Repository of Electronic Literature.* Such a repository might offer a mid-way between voluntary, free access; community-based publication; and full-scale commercial publication.

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<sup>10</sup> Currently, there is one project along these lines underway at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, with several Danish Libraries involved.

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