

## BOOTSTRAPPING ELECTRONIC-LITERATURE: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ELMCIP PROJECT

Scott Rettberg

Developing a Network-Based Creative Community: Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice (ELMCIP) is a three-year (June 2010-June 2013) collaborative research project funded by HERA, the Humanities in the European Research Area framework, sponsored by EU FP7 and the national research councils of the countries participating in the framework. The project has involved researchers from seven institutions in six European nations, who together have produced seven events including seminars, workshops and the Remediating the Social conference and exhibition, documented by this volume.

The ELMCIP project has responded specifically to the 'Humanities as a Source of Creativity and Innovation' theme, of the original call, in producing research that examines how 'the processes and conditions of human creativity will add new understandings of the value systems of the humanities and the practices and conditions of the creative, performing and visual arts, and a much better understanding of how these values and processes might contribute to cultural, social and economic innovation.' Aspects of the call for projects addressed by ELMCIP have included research into the relation between technological innovation and artistic creativity, examining models of practice for developing and supporting creativity, considering the relationship between artists and writers who produce creative work and the communities that study them, and in particular how creative communities are functioning differently in a globally networked, technologically mediated environment than previously.

As a starting point, we asserted that creativity is not best understood as a manifestation of genius or inspiration within any particular individual, but instead as the collective, performative practices of communities. Considering the work of anthropologist James Leach, we understand creativity as an activity of exchange that enables people and communities. In studying and working to further develop the international community of electronic literature, we have thus focused less on particular individual artists and individual works, and more on the conditions and environment in which creativity takes place.

ELMCIP has studied the electronic literature community as exemplary of contemporary network-based creative practices, but we have not feigned disinterested objectivity in the endeavor. Although the work has included an ethnographic study of three different networked creative communities, conducted by Penny Travlou, for the most part our work has been focused on developing and expanding upon the efforts of an existing creative community, developing research infrastructure as well as opportunities for scholars, creative writers, and artists to gather and exchange ideas and publish new work that has advanced the field, especially as it has manifested itself within the European research area.

Each partner has taken responsibility for specific aspects of ELMCIP. At the University of Bergen, we organised and hosted a seminar in 2010 which addressed the topic of creative communities in electronic literature, examining different models of how communities have formed around regional or linguistic affiliations, formal and informal organisations, genres, and technological platforms. This work is resulting in two special issues of the open-access online journal *Dichtung Digital*. The other main contribution of the Bergen team has been the development of the Electronic Literature Knowledge Base (<http://elmcip.net/knowledgebase>), an online database that documents works of electronic literature, critical writing, authors, organisations, publishers, events, teaching resources, and databases and archives of work in the field. The Knowledge Base not only expands access to these resources but also automatically creates cross-references between them, so that we, for example, record not only the abstract of a piece of critical writing, but also its references to given creative works. These cross-references enable better understanding of the connections between different objects and actors at play in the field.

Blekinge Institute of Technology organised a workshop on Electronic Literature Pedagogy which brought together a number of educators teaching electronic literature in different international university contexts including literature, design, and creative writing programs to exchange ideas on best practices and curricular models. Blekinge is also the editorial

leader of the ELMCIP anthology, a collection of European works of electronic literature in multiple languages and exemplary of diverse practices. This anthology also includes pedagogical materials. The University of Jyväskylä produced a seminar on Electronic Literature Publishing and produced a report on different publishing venues for electronic literature in Europe. The University of Ljubljana arranged a seminar focused on the connections between electronic literature and new media art in a more general sense, apt given the fact that work in this field is as likely to be exhibited in a gallery context as it is to be published by any conventional means. A symposium at University of Amsterdam focused on Digital Poetics, wherein scholars considered the relationship between traditional literary research methodologies and the strange artifacts and practices of digital writing. At University College Falmouth, a workshop focused on Electronic Literature as Performance, informing development of some works in the Remediating the Social programme of artist commissions. A special issue of the journal *Performance Research* will follow that gathering. At the University of Edinburgh, an ethnographic study of several e-lit communities has been produced, as well as the conference and exhibition Remediating the Social.

Although this conference is the last event of the ELMCIP project, the funded work will continue through June 2013. A second book, including the ethnographic study, the report on European publication venues, reflective reports from each of the PIs of the project on their specific research theme, and recommendations for policy makers emerging from our research will follow next year. The online database will also continue to be maintained and developed well beyond the duration of the project. Most importantly, ELMCIP has itself resulted in a creative research community that has greatly expanded the field within Europe. The connections between international researchers resulting from the ELMCIP project will continue into the future. All of the activity produced by ELMCIP has resulted in an energising momentum in the field of electronic literature. Two of the major international conferences in the field, the Electronic Literature Organization conference and the E-Poetry Festival are for example already planning European iterations in the near future. It is a great time for Electronic Literature in Europe.

## REMEDIATING THE SOCIAL

Simon Biggs

The proposition of Remediating the Social is whether creativity might be considered a property emergent from a multi-modal social apparatus rather than, as is more commonly assumed, an attribute of individual or collective human agency. This proposition has been formulated within the context of an expanded apprehension of individual and collective ontology that considers selfhood, at least in part, as a socially contingent construct and, in this sense, both fascinatingly and idiosyncratically, a creation of the social space from which it emerges and is sustained within. In this context creativity is apprehended as a reflexive property of the inter-agency of social interactions, rather than as an activity concerned with the origination of novel things or a capability invested in an individual or group of individuals.

Remediating the Social seeks to explore this proposition through considering instances of practice that employ digital and networked systems, in their structure and function, and evidence these emergent characteristics in the processes involved in their making. Our focus is social media – not social media in the sense of media that are primarily concerned with enabling social interactions (e.g.: Facebook or Twitter, although these might be within the remit of this engagement) but media that are part of the apparatus we can identify as the social in action. The most fundamental medium that exhibits this property is language itself – and thus it is probably no accident that many of the artists encountered in this context often work with language and literary form. Another medium, which we will argue shares these properties in critically important ways, is the computer.

The artists and authors involved in Remediating the Social work with digital and networked systems. One way or another, they work with computers. Their practice engages people, individually and collectively, as mediated by (sometimes generated or emergent from within) machines. Such practice demands we ask, where is agency? This question is key to the work of many of these artists. Indeed, one would suspect that many of the artists and authors, whose work is documented and discussed here, choose to work with computers and networks because the issue of agency is key to their inquiry – they seek to question the inter-agency of author, reader and medium, often by problematising our apprehension of where the work originates. They ask us to consider how agency might be identified within constantly changing patterns of socially contingent inter-agency.

In this context we should remind ourselves of Terry Winograd's observation that 'the computer is a physical embodiment of the symbolic calculations envisaged by Hobbes and Leibniz. As such, it is really not a thinking machine, but a language machine' (Winograd 1991). Winograd's central argument is that the digital is of itself symbolic and thus language *per se*. He proposes that the computer is an evolution of writing and literacy, where language can be autonomic. Thus agency can be considered abrogated from the human and perceived as emergent from diverse origins. The computer can also be regarded as a central element of our contemporary social apparatus. Therefore, we can propose that just as the computer is more than a machine we can use to 'do' or 'make' language, so social media can be about more than the media we use to be social. If we accept that the social is linguistic, as will be proposed below, then we can also accept that computers are social, in the sense that Winograd argues they are linguistic.

Here we encounter an ontological problem related to issues concerning technology, revelation and agency, as addressed by, amongst others, Marshall McLuhan (sometimes considered, perhaps unfairly, to have misconstrued Heidegger's foundational work on agency and revelation in *The Question Concerning Technology* (Heidegger 1977)) and Robert K. Logan. Logan's work on the origin of language and culture as co-emergent phenomena with, or of, the (social) evolution of mind is relevant here.

Syntactilized verbal language extended the effectiveness of the human brain and created the mind. Language is a tool and all tools, according to McLuhan (1964), are extensions of the body that allow us to use our bodies more efficiently. I believe, that language is a tool which extended the brain and made it more effective thus creating the human mind which I have termed the extended mind. I have expressed this idea in terms of the equation: mind = brain + language (Logan 2005).