

Electronic Literature Communities, Part I

by [Scott Rettberg](#) and [Patricia Tomaszek](#)

The 2012 spring and summer issues of *Dichtung Digital*, guest-edited by Scott Rettberg and Patricia Tomaszek (University of Bergen, Norway), are closely related to the work of the research project [Developing a Network-Based Creative Community: Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice](#) (ELMCIP). ELMCIP is 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 eighteen innovative transnational research projects during the 2010-2013 period.

The ELMCIP project focuses on a particular creative community, of electronic literature practitioners, and ask how creative communities of practitioners form within transnational and transcultural contexts, within a globalized and distributed communications environment. Electronic Literature has always been a participatory activity for authors and readers. 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 involves working with people with different skills and collaborative acts with systems. A guiding hypothesis of the researchers working on the project has been to contest the idea that the model of the solitary artist, producing artifacts that embody creativity, is the ideal method to achieve creative outcomes. We rather consider creativity as an activity of exchange between people and communities, emergent from and innate to the interactions of people. Under this general frame the project asks a number of more specific research questions, two of which are most germane to the two special issues of *Dichtung Digital* we present readers in the spring and summer of 2012: the first of which is "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^[1] working at institutions including the University of Bergen (Norway), Blekinge Institute of Technology (Sweden), the University of Jyväskylä (Finland), the University of Amsterdam (Netherlands), the University of Ljubljana (Slovenia), University College Falmouth (England), the University of Edinburgh (Scotland), and New Media Scotland, includes researchers, 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 a field of creative and academic practice. The outcomes of the project then 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 has organized a number of seminars and events focused on specific research themes in electronic literature including seminars on: Electronic Literature Communities (Bergen, September 2010), an Electronic Literature Publishing (Jyväskylä, 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 will be a major

conference and electronic literature exhibition, "Remediating the Social" (Edinburgh, November 2012). In addition to academic presentations, electronic literature readings and performances have been a significant component of most of the seminars. All told, by the conclusion of the project, more than 200 researchers, creative writers, and artists will have contributed in some way to the work of the ELMCIP project, so even on the rudimentary level of activating a field of practice, ELMCIP has played an important development function. Additional outputs of the project that should have lasting value include:

1. the [ELMCIP Electronic Literature Knowledge Base](#) developed by the University of Bergen team. 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, and teaching resources germane to the field of electronic literature. Importantly, the Knowledge Base is extensively cross-referenced, so that researchers can begin to see how all of these artifacts, processes, activities, people and entities are related to each other. To date, the Knowledge Base includes more than 3500 records. The University of Bergen Electronic Literature Research Group will continue to maintain and develop this resource beyond the end of the ELMCIP project in 2013, and any researcher or author working in the field can contribute to it.
2. A survey of electronic literature publishing venues in Europe, produced by the University of Jyväskylä, which will provide 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. An multilingual anthology of European electronic literature, produced by the Blekinge Institute of Technology, edited by Maria Engberg and Talan Memmott, featuring eighteen works of electronic literature and accompanying pedagogical materials.
4. A book publication including the Remediating the Social 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 commentary by each PI about their research theme and seminar results produced during the project, including recommendations for cultural policymakers and other stakeholders in the field.
7. Several special issues of journals focused on specific research themes of the ELMCIP project, including these issues of *Dichtung Digital*, an issue of the *Performance Research Journal*, and others.

The diverse collection of essays you will explore in these two issues represent a research outcome of the first themed seminar of the ELMCIP project, the seminar on Electronic Literature Communities produced by the University of Bergen Electronic Literature Research Group in September 2010. A number of the essays in these two issues, including the essays by Philippe Bootz, Serge Bouchardon, Nick Montfort, Scott Rettberg, Jill Walker Rettberg, Rob Wittig, and Hans Kristian Rustad in this issue, and by Laura Borràs Castanyer, Yra van Dijk, Anders Løvlie, and Andrew Roberts in the next number, began their lives as presentations at that seminar. Following links from the Knowledge Base [record of that event](#), you can watch [video recordings of the original presentations](#) in their entirety, and also experience the live readings of e-lit which were part of the evening program.

Beyond the specific examples presented at the Electronic Literature Communities seminar, however, 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. We were hoping to present a number of different types of perspectives on the role and function of community in the practice of contemporary electronic literature, ranging for instance from national and language-group histories of electronic literature communities, to 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 geographical places, to comparisons between emergent communities and planned or institutional communities. We think you will find all of that here, and more. What you may not find here—yet—is a sweeping theoretical analysis or decisive conclusion about the function of community in the production of creativity. 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 we consider the contribution that the University of Bergen will make to the ELMCIP project final report, we will return to these essays in hopes of finding patterns within the tapestry of a field in the process of formation. We believe that other researchers interested both in the specific case of electronic literature and more generally in the function of community in creative practices of all kinds, will find evidence and inspiration here as well. This issue presents a starting point for broader theoretical analyses of creative communities. Another requirement in meeting the need to theorize the field is to gather more data about the community in question. 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 will provide not only a pool of data but also an analytical tool for researching the field of electronic literature.

A broad range of research foci and methodologies are represented within these two special issues. In their essay, Simon Biggs and Penny Travlou describe an ethnographic approach to studying network-based creative communities. Many of these contributions offer histories of affiliations of creative practitioners, what we might describe as snapshots of consensus-based communities in their process of formation. Phillipe Bootz's and Serge Bouchardon's contributions to this issue present specific examples, for instance, of how artistic networks took shape in France. One interesting consideration here is how these processes of affiliation, which are essentially social in nature, might lead to "genre formation"—that is to say that insofar as the practice of generative poetics might loosely be understood as a genre of electronic literature, the drift of the focus a particular community of practice towards generative and combinatory practices rather than some other poetic approach might offer evidence that whatever we think of as genres in the future will be as determined by the community in which the artist situates him or herself as they are by any technical or poetics qualities of the works themselves.

Jill Walker Rettberg, Scott Rettberg, and Rob Wittig in this issue all offer different perspectives on the formation of American electronic literature communities. 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. Rettberg offers a narrative history of how one of the most important organizations in the field—the Electronic Literature Organization—originated and evolved as a collective identity, basing his description of this history on archival materials and ephemera that document the early years of this still-vital nonprofit literary organization. On a different scale, e-lit author Rob Wittig describes the conditions under which a number of collaborative creative communities he has taken part in—including the legendary collective-novel-writing-endeavor *Invisible Seattle*—have coalesced and developed. Wittig in particular investigates the importance of face-to-face human interaction in developing optimal conditions for creativity: the shape of the table, the size of the room, the availability of coffee and/or wine, and the conversational strategies of facilitators, Wittig argues, may be just as important in sparking creativity within a group as the particular creative talents of any of its members.

From the North, Hans Kristian Rustad offers an introduction to electronic literature, and critical approaches to electronic literature, which have originated in the Nordic countries. Though clearly a minority practice in minority languages, we nevertheless discover that there are a number of compelling examples of e-lit that have been produced in most of the Nordic languages. While e-lit authors in Scandinavia or Finland may work in comparative isolation to their American or French colleagues, a type of community is nevertheless taking shape.

To come back to the question of genre in electronic literature, we take it as a given that particular software platforms to some extent constrain and afford digital writing practices, techniques, and styles of works that are produced using them. 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 creative practices in particular platforms and the communities that develop around them²¹. Software alone is not exclusively determinative in the formation of digital literary genres: the social apparatus a particular community develops around a set of practices may ultimately be more important than the architecture of the platform itself. This issue includes two essays that consider platform-based communities from this perspective: Nick Montfort and Emily Short's piece on interactive fiction communities, and Donna Leishman's essay on the Flash community.

Finally, no treatment of creative community in electronic literature would be complete without at least one manifestation of e-lit, and we are very pleased to be able to offer a new work by Stuart Moulthrop—an "arcade essay" that rehearses some of the "scandals in new media" that framed (and to some extent continue to frame) critical discourse around digital writing, particularly the debates that have centered around the distinctions between literature and game. The essays collected here and in the next issue offer evidence that the constellation of communities that constitute the field of electronic literature have achieved a certain level of maturity—have survived some growing pains are now well into their adolescence—if not quite their middle age. Perhaps they are robust enough that we might, as Moulthrop suggests, begin to take a look at them in a more "post-serious" way and gain a greater understanding of how literary artifacts and the communities that produce cultures around them function in our digital age.

Electronic Literature Communities, Part I (Spring 2012)

Simon Biggs and Penny Travlou: [Distributed Authorship and Creative Communities](#)

Philippe Bootz: [From OULIPO to Transitoire Observable](#)

Serge Bouchardon: [Digital Literature in France](#)

Jill Walker Rettberg: [Electronic Literature Seen from a Distance: The Beginnings of a Field](#)

Scott Rettberg: [Developing an Identity for the Field of Electronic Literature. Reflections on the Electronic Literature Organization Archives](#)

Rob Wittig: [Shyness, Cushions, and Food. Case Studies in American Creative Communities](#)

Hans Kristian Rustad: [A Short History of Electronic Literature and Communities in the Nordic Countries](#)

Nick Montfort and Emily Short: [Interactive Fiction Communities. From Preservation through Promotion and Beyond](#)

Donna Leishman: [The Flash Community. Implications for Post-Conceptualism](#)

Stuart Moulthrop: [Sc4nda1 in New Media](#)

Electronic Literature Communities, Part II (Summer 2012)

David Meurer: [Towards Network Narrative: Electronic Literature, Communication Technologies, and Cultural Production](#)

Loss Pequeño Glazier: [Communities/Commons: A Snap Line of Digital Practice](#)

Ottar Ormstad: [From Concrete to Digital Poetry: Driving Down the Road of Continuity?](#)

Andrew Michael Roberts, Lisa Otty, Martin H. Fischer, and Anna Katharina Schaffner: [Creative Practice and Experimental Method in](#)

Electronic Literature and Human Experimental Psychology
Laura Borràs Castanyer: Growing Up Digital: The Emergence of E-Lit
Communities in Spain. The Case of Catalonia "and the rest is
literature"
Yra van Dijk: Topdown Digital Literature: The Effects of Institutional
Collaborations and Communities
Jerome Fletcher and Lisa Somma: Offshore of Writing: E-literature and
the Island
Anders Sundnes Løvlie: flâneur, a walkthrough: Locative Literature as
Participation and Play
Mark C. Marino and Rob Wittig: Netprov: Elements of an Emerging
Form

Notes

[1] At the University of Bergen, Scott Rettberg (ELMCIP Project Leader), Jill Walker Rettberg (Co-Investigator), Eric Rasmussen (Researcher), Patricia Tomaszek (PhD Candidate), Elisabeth Nesheim (Research Assistant). At Blekinge Institute of Technology, Maria Engberg (Principal Investigator), Talan Memmott (Co-Investigator), David Prater (Researcher). At the University of Jyväskylä, Raine Koskimaa (Principal Investigator), Markku Eskelinen (Researcher), Giovanna Di Rosario (Researcher). At the University of Ljubljana, Janez Strehovec (Principal Investigator). At the University of Amsterdam, Yra van Dijk (Principal Investigator). At University College Falmouth, Jerome Fletcher (Principal Investigator). At the University of Edinburgh / Edinburgh College of Art, Simon Biggs (Principal Investigator), Penny Travlou (Co-Investigator), Magnus Lawrie (PhD Candidate).

[2] Another excellent resource for understanding the relationship between electronic literature and software platforms is Judy Malloy's "[Authoring Software](#)" site, which offers an ongoing collection of statements by electronic literature authors about authoring tools and software. It also looks at the relationship between interface and content in new media writing and at how the innovative use of authoring tools and the creation of new authoring tools have expanded digital writing/hypertext writing/net narrative practice.