

## **ELO 2021 Conference and Festival: Platform (Post?) Pandemic**

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### **An Institutional Approach to Building a Platform of Digital Literary Works: The Case(s) of Dutch and Flemish Digital Literature**

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Please allow me to start this paper by making my intentions clear right away. My goal is to present our research project on electronic literature, to explain our theoretical approach, and – most important of all – to learn from researchers who have tackled similar issues and questions. Therefore, it is a great privilege to be able to present the project for you today at this conference, and I look forward to your comments and questions.

#### [Introducing the Project](#)

The recently formed [Dutch Digital Literature Consortium](#) – a partnership of researchers from Dutch universities, the Royal Library of the Netherlands and local libraries – aims to develop and launch an online catalogue of digital literature, created in the Netherlands and Flanders between 1970 and 2023, and turn this collection into a publicly accessible digital database. The project draws inspiration from comparable databases, such as the Electronic Literature Collection 1-3, NT2, Hermeneia, and Literatura Electrónica Hispánica (cf. Pablo & Goicoechea 2014). Whereas these databases bring together digital literary projects from a variety of traditions, the project at hand focuses exclusively on works from a specific linguistic area.

The catalogue's target audience can be divided into three domains: 1) academic research 2) education – in particular secondary education, and 3) public libraries. The Consortium's aim is to launch the online catalogue by the end of 2023. It will be hosted by CLARIAH (Common Lab Research Infrastructure for the Arts and Humanities), a distributed research infrastructure for the humanities and social sciences funded by the Dutch government. In preparation for the catalogue, the Consortium gratefully makes use of the ELMCIP infrastructure in compiling a provisional list of electronic literature from the Netherlands and Flanders (the list can be found here: <https://elmcip.net/research-collection/digital-literary-works-flanders-and-netherlands>).

Such a development of a database of electronic literature gives rise to several theoretical and methodological questions. The first category of questions concerns the problem of *documentation*. Which works and genres are eligible to be included in the database, and on what grounds can we make this selection? How are we to find, metadata, and categorize all available expressions of digital literature created in the Netherlands and Flanders? As a postdoctoral researcher, it is my role to formulate answers to these questions, and as such lay a theoretical foundation for the database.

The second category of questions concerns the issue of *implementation*. We wish to turn the collection into a digital catalogue that meets the FAIR (findable, accessible, interoperable, and

reusable) principles (Wilkinson et al 2016). A second postdoc, who will start in October 2021, will be responsible for this second phase.

At the moment, we are still in the documentation stage of the project. In the remainder of this paper, I will focus on our approach and present some preliminary results. Finally, I would very much appreciate any feedback or comments on this plan.

### An institutional approach

The questions of documentation critically hinge on the fundamental question what electronic literature *is*. Given the changing nature of electronic literature, it is not very productive to try to pin down the phenomenon based on a limited number of fixed characteristics (cf. Tabbi 2009). Nevertheless, we need a starting point on which to base the selection criteria of the database.

As a first step to the theoretical foundation of our database, we take on an institutional approach to electronic literature. The question what belongs to the domain of electronic literature has been answered – explicitly and implicitly – by different actors and institutions involved with electronic literature, such as funding institutions, libraries, academic scholars, and other ‘gatekeepers’. If, as Florian Cramer claims, ‘electronic literature ha[s] established itself as a field in Pierre Bourdieu’s sense, i.e. as an area of production and discourse with intrinsic distinctions and authorities’ (Cramer 2012, 1), then we need to consider how such authorities push electronic literature in specific directions.

Electronic literature is institutionally framed in various ways. By initiating and financing projects, institutions unmistakably leave a mark on the *material* production of electronic literature (Van Dijk 2012, 2). They also play an important role in the *symbolic* production of the art form. This term refers to the question of whether a particular work belongs to the domain of (electronic) literature, but also applies in a more general sense to the question of whether electronic literature should be regarded as a (separate) literary genre. Lastly, institutions often play an important role in the distribution of electronic literature. Research centers and governmental organizations display electronic literature through online channels and – in non-pandemic times – on festivals and other events.

Our institutional approach consists of an analysis of the discourse surrounding electronic literature in the Netherlands and Flanders. First, we examine which digital genres and individual works are considered *literary* by the institutions. Next, we examine what is considered *digital* within specific contexts. Lastly, we consider how the qualifications of the ‘literary’ and the ‘digital’ interact in the discourse of these institutions. The next step is to bring this discourse in relation to current debates within the international field of electronic literature.

### The benefits of an institutional approach

In our view, an institutional analysis is productive for a number of reasons. First, an institutional analysis is valuable because it provides insight into processes of inclusion and exclusion: which works and forms are institutionally regarded as electronic literature, and on what grounds? Which forms have been overlooked? Are there works that no longer fit within the contemporary framework of electronic literature? In addition to this, we believe an institutional approach can accommodate the fact that our

own database is caught up in institutional dynamics as well. In other words, it provides a comparative starting point for our own selection criteria.

Second, an institutional approach does justice to the fluid nature of electronic literature. In our view, an institutional analysis is contingent on a media and literary-historical analysis: it allows us to consider transformations in both the media landscape and the literary landscape. After all, what is considered digital and what is considered literary changes over time.

Lastly, attention to the institutional frameworks provides insight into the unique aspects of electronic literature in the Low Countries. Of course, we are aware that electronic literature is *also* a transnational phenomenon. However, we believe that electronic literature always takes shape within a specific techno-cultural context as well. By paying attention to the various ways in which institutional frameworks shape and determine electronic literature, we can bring the specificities of the Dutch and Flemish electronic literature traditions into focus. Our approach is thus a plea to consider the art form in relation to specific contexts.

### Preliminary results

The preliminary results of our research into the institutional framework surrounding electronic literature in the Low Countries illustrate this final point. In Flanders and the Netherlands, the institutional framework of digital literature is largely reliant on governmental subsidy providers. Considering the 'traditional' literary institutions, the Letterenfonds (the Dutch Fund for Literature) is arguably the most important institution to support this art form, as became clear at an expert meeting on electronic literature organized by the Dutch Reading Foundation Stichting Lezen in 2017.

This fact points to an important difference with other language areas. In the United States, for instance, electronic literature has traditionally found a home at universities: it is taught at creative writing courses, and many electronic literature pioneers have been employed at universities. In the words of Florian Cramer: '[E]lectronic literature was, and continues to be, as closely tied to literature departments as composed computer music is to research lab-style university studios, at least in Northern America. On top of that, the critics were often the same people as the artists in those two academic communities' (Cramer 2012, 1). In Flanders and the Netherlands, such an institutional embedding is absent.<sup>1</sup> Literature departments do play an important role, however, in the *symbolic* production of electronic literature. In fact, scholarship has been the most important form of reception, as Yra van Dijk explains: 'Due to the absence of traditional gate-watchers like publishers and newspaper critics, the function of selection, distribution, and reception of this work has been taken over partly by anthologies, reviews and criticism that are produced in an academic climate' (Van Dijk 2012, 1). Thus far, publishers have largely ignored electronic literature (cf. Stiller 2003). Literary magazines have occasionally paid attention to the phenomenon (Baetens & Vos 1999; Van Adrichem 2006).

The institutional framework unmistakably leaves its mark on the productions. All projects funded by the Letterenfonds, for instance, involve authors who can be institutionally classified as 'literary' authors. On the one hand, this qualification points – *petitio principii* – to their role in the literary domain: their works have been published by literary publishers and they have often won literary

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<sup>1</sup> The notable exception is Victor Gijsbers, who is a professor of philosophy at Leiden University and a renowned author of interactive fiction.

awards. On the other hand, the term 'literary' also concerns a judgement of value. A publication by the Letterenfonds and branch organization KVB Boekwerk mentions the 'unmistakable literary qualities' of the electronic literature productions they have highlighted. The authors specify these qualities as: 'nuance, complexity, empathy and defamiliarization' (Dresscher e.a. 2017, 2).

Overseeing the productions of electronic literature created with financial help of the Letterenfonds, a clear division of roles stands out as well: the literary authors provided the text, while a (team of) creator(s) was responsible for the technical realization. The institutional framework thus partly determines the shared authorship of digital literature, as is shown by Yra van Dijk in her analysis of works financed by the Letterenfonds (Van Dijk 2012, 7; cf. Hayles 2006). Arnoud van Adrichem and Jan Baetens interpret the institutional embeddedness of electronic literature as an attempt to encapsulate a phenomenon that threatens to undermine traditional actors of the literary field (2009, 21). They claim that literary institutions have shielded electronic literature as an experimental form with a highbrow image.

The scholarship on electronic literature in Flanders and the Netherlands has focused on works that meet this description as well. Almost all academic studies on electronic literature from Flanders and the Netherlands date from the first decade of the millennium (see for example: Van Looy 2003; Van Adrichem 2009; Van Adrichem & Baetens 2009; Van Dijk 2012). These studies mainly focus on animated poetry and works that make use of the affordances of the internet. In other words, scholarship has been limited to works of the 'second generation', to refer to N. Katherine Hayles's famous distinction (Hayles 2002). This is no surprise, considering that, as Phillippe Bootz has pointed out, 'in a European context hypertext has not been the dominant mode but rather textual generators and animated works' (Hayles 2008, 18; cf. Bootz 1999).

### Alternative approaches

Generally, electronic literature from Flanders and the Netherlands is institutionally understood as a form of experimental literature that was at its peak in the first decade of the millennium. The question arises to what extent this conception of electronic literature eclipses alternative conceptions. In a 2012 article, Florian Cramer argued that the notion of electronic literature as intrinsically experimental fails to reflect the way in which literary forms are disseminated and consumed in our current digital age. The nature of digital media and their impact on society, and their place in people's lives have changed dramatically over the past two decades. A renewed look at electronic literature can shed light on both the present and the past of this art form. Recent international scholarship on electronic literature offers starting points for such an approach.

Approaches of the 'first' and 'second generation' explicitly considered electronic literature in relation to the concept of 'New Media'. These approaches have run along two tracks: 1) on the one hand, there is an emphasis on the continuity with older artistic traditions. 2) On the other hand, electronic literature breaks with these traditions, which has mainly to do with the affordances that digital media bring (cf. Rettberg 2018). Maria Engberg & Jay David Bolter, for instance, consider Brian Kim Stefans's *The Dream-Life of Letters* (Stefans 2000) as a continuation of avant-garde poetry, which Stefans's Flash poem seems to 'complete' (Engberg & Bolter 2012, 10). This approach has been fruitful understanding the affordances that the computer has provided for literature as an art form. However,

while computers are still relatively young in comparison to the technology of the book, we can ask ourselves to what extent the notion of digital media as 'new' still holds up today.

As the nature and function of digital media in society has shifted, scholars have argued for new approaches to electronic literature. One of these scholars is Spencer Jordan, who states: 'Running alongside [the] tradition of the avant-garde and the experimental [electronic literature], is a more recent condition which, rather than responding to digital technology's novelty and originality, is instead a recognition of its overwhelming presence in everyday life' (Jordan 2019, 10). He adds: 'In a world where computerisation is fundamentally normalised, any understanding of the digital as subversive and radical becomes redundant' (Jordan 2019, 16).

In this light, it is necessary to go beyond the paradigm of literary experimentation. This opens the door to forms that do not align themselves with 'the literary tradition formed by the print world', as the second generation did (Flores 2019, 10). Leonardo Flores has proposed the label of '3rd generation e-literature' for works that instead can be identified 'with electronic and digital media in terms of its formats and publication models' (Flores 2019, 10). One of the most popular forms in this category is Instagram poetry. In recent years, Dutch and Flemish poets who publish their work (exclusively) on Instagram and Twitter have gained popularity (Dera & Van der Starre 2019). In the Low Countries, their work is hardly ever considered as a form electronic literature, however, since this label is reserved for the more experimental works of earlier years.

The question of whether Instagram poetry should be classified as 'electronic literature' is still under debate in the community of electronic literature scholars (cf. Berens 2019). The case of Instagram poetry does show that an institutional approach that only considers the traditional gatekeepers (i.e. academia, publishers, funding institutions), has its limitations. If we want to understand electronic literature, we also need to take its users into consideration, as Flores suggests when he writes that 'third generation [digital literature] coexists with the previous one and accounts for a massive scale of born digital work produced by and for contemporary audiences for whom digital media has become naturalized' (2019, x; cf. Gitelman 2006, 61).

When we leave behind the strict focus on literary experimentation, an alternative story about electronic literature in the Low Countries opens up. Recently, there has been institutional appreciation for early hypertext stories, albeit not from an academic or a literary perspective. The hypertext works *Nijmeegs avontuur* (Wim Couwenberg 1980) and *Hollanditis* (1985, John Vanderaart) were included in the Videogames Canon, which was initiated by the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Image. These works are part of the history of video games from the Low Countries, but they belong to the history of electronic literature as well – especially because of their reliance on text. A history of Dutch and Flemish hypertext fiction remains to be written (cf. Van Looy 2003).

Equally little is known about forms of 'prehistoric' electronic literature – to use Christopher Funkhouser's (2007) apt label for forms of electronic literature that predate the hypertext works from the 1980s and '90s. Articles on Gerrit Krol and Greta Monach point to the fact that Dutch authors experimented with the possibilities of the computer as early as the 1970s (Mourits 2018; Martin 2020). Additional research into both literary and non-literary forms of early computer experimentation is needed.

## Concluding remarks

Considering that the first volume of the Electronic Literature Collection dates from 2006, one could say our database of electronic literature from Flanders and the Netherlands arrives somewhat late to the party. This late arrival, however, gives us the opportunity to draw on the extensive (international) scholarship on electronic literature and to place different emphases.

The preliminary results of our institutional approach show that the 'traditional' gatekeepers of electronic literature in the Low Countries have framed the genre as a form of highbrow experimental literature that was at its peak in the first decade of the millennium. While literary experimentation is without a doubt an important aspect of the form's history and genealogy, there are other possible conceptions and forms of electronic literature that can and should have a place in its historiography as well. We can consider, for instance, how electronic literature relates to the history of digital media in a larger sense. In such an approach, the history of video games overlaps with that of electronic literature. Additionally, we should recognize that the users of digital media have institutional agency as well. In this regard, the popularity of forms like Instagram poetry, for instance, challenges traditional conceptions of electronic literature.

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## **Biography**

Siebe Bluijs is a postdoctoral researcher at Tilburg University, the Netherlands. He holds a PhD in Dutch Literature from Ghent University (Belgium). His research interests concern the relations between media and meaning-making in literary works. His current research focuses on 'digital literature' (e.g. poetry that employs kinetic typography, literary smartphone applications, and narratives in virtual reality). In his PhD-project, he analyzed the form and functioning of the postwar literary radio play in the Low Countries, focusing on innovations in narrative and semiotic composition. Bluijs extensively writes on contemporary (Dutch) literature, and is particularly interested in experimental literature. Additionally, he has a background in graphic design, with a specialization in book design and typography.