

## Remixing The Canon: Electronic Literature & Distributed Narratives

Following in the footsteps and example of New Historicism and Cultural Studies beforehand, it is time to again reexamine the literary canon towards the inclusion of electronic literature in the curriculum of literature programs and the larger literary canon. What do I mean by electronic literature? UCLA's [N. Katherine Hayles'](#) essay [\*Electronic Literature: What Is It?\*](#) offered by the [Electronic Literature Organization](#), from a committee lead by UC San Diego's [Noah Wardrip Fruin](#), defines electronic literature as a “work with an important literary aspect that takes advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand alone or networked computer.” [Matthew Kirschenbaum](#) from the University of Maryland offers his own: “Poetry, fiction, or other literary work that depends on the distinctive behavioral, visual, or material properties of computers, computer networks, and code for its composition, execution, and reception.”

### Examples

- Hypertext fiction: Michael Joyce's [\*Afternoon\*](#), Caitlin Fisher's [\*These Waves Of Girls\*](#), Shelley Jackson's [\*Patchwork Girl\*](#)
- Interactive fiction: [\*Zork\*](#), [\*Adventure\*](#), more recently [Nick Montfort's \*Book & Volume\*](#), and Emily Short's [\*Galatea\*](#).

At last spring's [annual ELO symposium at the University of Maryland](#), Hayles' keynote [\*Literature & The Literary: Why Electronic Literature Is Key To Their Future\*](#) offered useful steps to begin incorporating electronic literature into more English program curriculums. Hayles spoke of three ways to do so:

- A department of media arts: film people, computer people, literary people

- An interdisciplinary program where students from different departments come together
- Departments of English or other literatures that introduce electronic literature as a component of their faculty lines, curriculum, etc

A problem arises during this process. While more schools across the country and around the world are adding electronic literature or tracks for New Media Studies to their programs there is still resistance to its inclusion in the traditional English program on many campuses. As Hayles notes in her keynote, many literature departments are difficult to persuade that the inclusion of electronic literature is important to their overall study of literature. The approach I would offer to convince skeptics of the validity of electronic literature's inclusion is to examine the evolution of Barthes' writerly text to electronic literature and how electronic literature accentuates discussion of authorship.

One of the most recent evolutions in authorship is what University of Bergen, in Norway, scholar [Jill Walker-Rettberg](#) has defined as [Distributed Narrative](#). Walker defines distributed narrative: "Distributed narratives don't bring media together to make a total artwork. Distributed narratives explode the work altogether, sending fragments and shards across media, through the network and sometimes into the physical spaces that we live in. This project explores this new narrative trend, looking at how narrative is spun across the network and into our lives."

The evolution of the writerly text has allowed literature to leave the bounded text and expands notions of what is literature. An example of a distributed narrative is the sticker novel [Implementation](#), written by Monfort and Scott Rettberg (formerly of the Richard Stockton College Of New Jersey, currently at the University of Bergen in Norway). *Implementation* was written in 2004 as an eight installment novel on sheets of stickers. Readers were asked to print

their own copies onto 2x5 sheets and place stickers in private and public, photographing them as they go. Monfort and Rettberg created a Web Site where participants could send in their photos to be included in the collection of singular entries in the novel.

Issues of authorship: A distributed narrative takes the writerly text and moves out of the bounded text into the world around us. Readers, literally participants, actively take pieces of the novel and adapt it to their surroundings. The reader is alive, the author is dead, and she keeps carving a bigger stake to kill him with. The issues that distributed narratives, and New Media like electronic literature in general, address by their very existence enrich the scholarly examination of literature. What is a text? What is literature? Does leaving behind the bounded text and entering the psychical world make a sticker novel like *Implementation* any less literary?

It will come as no surprise probably that I would say no. Just because literature is not in a sheet filled, bound book, does not make it any less literary. After examining the recent evolutions of the writerly text, bigger issues about pedagogy and the canon come to surface. There are many questions to ask at this point. Does leaving behind the bounded text and entering the psychical world make a sticker novel like *Implementation* any less literary? Does clicking links in a hypertext novel change how close reading is assigned? How does the uniqueness of each reader's reading experience change it? Discussion should turn to what can be defined as a "text" and a general call for the canon to expand yet again to be inclusive of electronic literature and other forms of new media. Issues of canon revision, pedagogy, and how we decide what is and is not literature need to be explored further by scholars both in and outside of new media.

How does the inclusion of Caitlin Fisher's hypermedia memoir [\*These Waves Of Girls\*](#),

while explores issues of gender, sexuality, and narrator reliability complement a bounded text which explores the same issues? How does a distributed narrative like *Implementation* change how we think about Barthes' writerly text? What does creating a sticker novel or a student produced hypertext edition of a novel like Mary Rowlandson's [\*Sovereignty & The Goodness Of God\*](#) do to impact student learning? What does *Patchwork Girl*, a retelling of *Frankenstein*, say about Shelley (Mary)?

How can issues surrounding translation, like those brought up during the [panel on international electronic literature at ELO 2007](#), accentuate discussion of the same issues for the bounded text? These are just some of the pedagogical questions which require a closer examination.