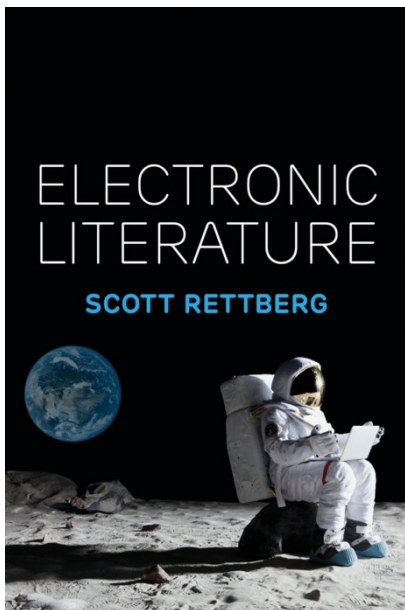# Electronic Literature as e-lit(e): (or an astronaut sitting on the moon playing with a laptop)

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Scott Rettberg. *Electronic Literature*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019. 234 pp. ISBN: 978-1509516773.

Just over ten years ago, Electronic Literature stopped being a somewhat marginal community – a few enthusiasts exploring the potential of literature in association with electronics –, to be something else. Not coincidentally, much of this change in *statu quo* had to do with N. Katherine Hayles' *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (2008), a book plus CD "intended to help electronic literature move into the classroom." (Hayles, ix). From that moment onwards, and mainly propelled by the activity(ies) of the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO), such as annual conferences that year after year kept gathering more and more participants, e-

lit, not so much a cluster of genres as a genre of clusters, started to be teachable. However, for several reasons of different nature, such transformation happened to be in a very "locative" way, hence building a true peripheral status in the ten years that followed (coincidentally, "peripheries" was this year's chosen theme for the ELO Conference and Festival, at Cork, Ireland).

It so happens that living in the periphery – and peripheries do tend to shape and limit what they circumscribe, particularly those inhabited by certain elites – has its specific advantages in relation to marginality. At least, that is what *Electronic Literature* (2019) seems to prove. Written by Scott Rettberg, American digital artist and scholar based in Bergen, Norway, also known as co-founder and first Executive Director of the ELO, and a very active member of the e-lit community, this new volume by Polity Press shows that the status presently acquired by electronic literature is precisely that of being a peripheral field of studies, which means having freedom for experimentation without taking the risk of being secluded at the margin of history. After all, it is common sense that a community has its benefits and e-lit is no exception. To show it we have none other than the illustrious N. Katherine Hayles, stating in one of the back cover's blurb that this "important book by the field's founder [...] will be the definitive work on electronic literature [...]". Nonetheless, and if, like Hayles seems to admit, it is time to pass the baton, it becomes necessary, though, to clarify the ways in which this promising book marks the beginning of a new stage for electronic literature "now and for many years to come".

Hayles's first attempt to create a classroom companion and canon that could be used for teaching, in 2008, proved successful, particulary since her book became the standard reference for the teaching of digital literature, for the last decade and not just in the US. In explicitly acknowledging a relation with the nature and aims of the first *Electronic Literature*, not only for making use of the same title and for aiming towards a larger audience, but, above all, for presenting it as a textbook for classroom use, Rettberg raises the odds in the process of (re)creation and establishment of a field. However, in its assumed pedagogic and didactic intentions, which may imply a simplification by means of theoretical and historical limitations, what is gained and what is lost? Or, to put it another way, believing that the book will fulfill the designs established by Hayles, hence moving it into more mainstream topics and fields, in its "didactization" of e-lit – lite version –, (how) will it contribute to a broader reception of e-lit that is beyond its current "peripheral" position?

As a community formally supported by an organization created and based in North America, e-lit naturally takes the English language as its main source of communication (at every possible level). Accordingly, and

himself being a writer of (hypertext) fiction in English, Rettberg aligns with the ELO. The problem begins when the corpus of works selected by the author is limited, not just to a hegemonic language, but also to specific geopolitical contexts. Which begs for a more specific question: in what ways is a literary canon specifically built for a relatively new (peripheral) field like e-lit able to cause worldwide effects? That is, what is the relationship between a corpus of (digital literary) works, the language it uses and the regions where it was produced? And, perhaps more significant than that, does its condition of being electronic reinforces or dilutes these relative positions?

But we might as well ask to what extent the hegemony of a language can influence and shape a community (and vice-versa)? This becomes clear enough when Rettberg recruits Shakespeare as paradigm of discursive poetry and of poetic standards in English (31), which, in turn, will irremediably affect his argument for the necessity of "compelling language" in electronic literature (13). It remains to be said what exactly does the author mean by "compelling language". For instance, regarding his selection of Dada as a main predecessor of combinatory poetics, were the Dadaists even concerned with language at all? Or should the argument, in this case, be more "compelling"?

On the other hand, is a (constantly growing) community of practices and practitioners enough to make of electronic literature a field, an area, a subject or a group of genres of its own? Rettberg seems to think so, or at least he makes use of that argument in order to build a logical structure of what the "subject" has become during the past two decades. This logic is built from his preference in writing a standard textbook (no CD included). Regardless of what digital has brought in terms of the materialities of writing and reading, this particular mechanism still seems to be the prodigal son when it comes to pedagogic and didactic values. And if this is the case, there is no such thing as "digital natives", at least in the near future, since (text)(paper)books continue to enjoy an indisputable privileged status as main references of any dissertation, curriculum or syllabus. Which means that Rettberg's *Electronic Literature* is a book exclusively written for "digital emigrants", or better, digital newcomers. And, if not, why bother to create a division into genres instead of fully adopting a division into creative communities that practice, experiment and master certain types of (digital) technologies (88)?

For the sake of its pedagogic purposes, it is understandable that Rettberg has chosen a strategy to think of his students at the University of Bergen, namely in exploring "the potential future of electronic literature as discipline" (83), which implies finding a series of different forms and

classifying them as genres with their own predecessors in the Western history of arts and literature. Making use of the textbook's affordances, Rettberg divides his book into "five core genres of electronic literature: combinatory poetics, hypertext fiction, interactive fiction and other game like forms", "kinetic and interactive poetry and network writing" (183), plus a series of other "genres" he creatively classifies as "divergent streams", such as "locative narrative, digital literary installations, virtual and augmented reality narrative and interactive and combinatory cinema" (183). Again, for the sake of pedagogy, given the significant role of the teacher that also characterizes many new media scholars and/or artists, there seems to be no problem with that particular separation, as long as it is duly justified. As such, the distribution of chapters is clearly justified by the author, in a subsection dedicated to structure and method, as being created in a "roughly parallel structure, each approaching a different genre or set of related practices." (18). However, in the next page, Rettberg also alerts "the majority of creative works presently shown and studied as electronic literature exhibit elements of one or more of these genres." (19). Moreover, this apparent paradox will be a concern of the author throughout the book, for instance, in page 183, in which Rettberg justifies that, despite such apparent division, the use of this structure "is not to suggest that they are completely distinct from one another, in fact they are most often intermingled." (183).

But what happens when everything needs to be excessively compartmentalized in their boxes, which in turn gives rise to a somewhat forced historicization? Example of this being the identification of literary experimental predecessors to each one of the aforementioned genres: Dada, Surrealism, the Oulipo and Fluxus for "Combinatory Poetics", to quote a few. Regardless of the ways that Dada *was* not, Dada still *is*, wouldn't visual texts from Mannerism and Baroque periods be a more logic influence, as several scholars inside and outside the e-lit community already pointed? And the same concerns the associations of modernists and postmodernists with "Hypertext Fiction", (video)games with "Interactive Fiction and Other Gamelike Forms"; Lettrism, Concrete Poetry and the Noigandres, Symbolism, Futurism, Visual and Asemic Poetry, Sound Poetry and "moving letters in film" with "Kinetic and Interactive Poetry"; and so on and so forth, until a final convergence of many divergences. Mostly because the author admittedly suggests that *these* genres have *these* predecessors, but, given the fluid, unstable, disruptive and often subversive nature of artifacts in electronic literature, he might as well have chosen to present a different configuration. So, why then separate them and present them as if they were independent forms with their own predecessors? Is it not the case that each of these

forms works in dialectic tension with one another, building artwork after artwork upon each other? In addition, despite being arguably useful in presenting to readers (students?) previous artistic forms (genres?) that somehow already attempted to answer some of the concerns now posed by electronic literature, it might be the case that such strategy runs the risk of excessive simplification, not to mention a possibly biased history of experimentalism, namely in the promotion of new, though unintentional, ideologies. For instance, the association of Fascism to Italian Futurism may not be as simple as the author puts it (125), since it raises a series of many complex questions still to be answered.

Notwithstanding, Rettberg knows that "[t]his book is not the only game in town, not the only platform on which contemporary writers should expend their energies, not the only cultural site in which compelling literary experiences can occur" (203), even if it is an excellent portal into all of these previous things – a fundamental advantage that comes from the author's multifaceted experience of two decades working with e-lit. It is this same advantage that enables him to synthesize the state of the art of electronic literature, from the 1990s to present day, a privileged view that has little to do with the image chosen for the hard cover: an astronaut holding a laptop, while sitting on the moon with his back turned to planet Earth.[1]

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1 I would like to thank the editors of the journal for their comments on earlier drafts of this review.