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In Search of Literature across Media

As a tradition-hearted English major with a wistful nostalgia for the turn of the twentieth century, pursuing digital media and electronic literature would have been unthinkable two years ago. During an intensive course in literary theory, however, my encounter with N. Katherine Hayles opened my eyes to the compelling implications of digital media. The World Wide Web and digital text formats have opened new venues and provoked theoretical questions concerning the field of English studies and the question of genre in literature.

In many ways, my project has been a response to the challenge posed by Hayles to apply the same critical tradition long devoted to print literature to Internet literary productions in order to draw electronic literature into the realm of literary studies and ensure the relevance of such programs in the future. At first intimidated by the unfamiliar terrain of electronic works, the influence of Hayles undermined my impulse to privilege print over electronic copy or vice versa. Under her critical guidance, the biases of other scholars in the emerging discipline of electronic literature came across as misguided and irrelevant. My objective in this project has been from the beginning to discern continuity from print to digital media, much like the transition from manuscript copy to print in the sixteenth century.

Not surprisingly, the first thread I pursued in the quest to uncover the relationship between print and electronic literature, was the literature reviews and bibliographies of Hayles's most relevant works, specifically articles and books that most narrowly focused on the interaction between print and electronic text. Through mining these lit reviews and bibliographies, I found

the trail to the wider conversation about the transition to digital literature and the effort to redefine both text and genre.

Poststructuralist theory regarding language and code systems has made significant incursions into theory regarding electronic text, most notably in Hayles's seminal essay, "Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers." The web of theory, from academic books to more popular nonfiction regarding the digital age, led me from Walter J. Ong to Richard Lanham to the French duo Deleuze and Guattari and their enlightening rhizome metaphor for literary media. Reviews from the MLA database, as well as forays into WorldCat.org, greatly supplemented my findings from lit reviews and bibliographies.

From the realm of hard theory, the quest divided into several directions: media studies, literary criticism of new "remediated" print novels (i.e. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*) and of electronic works (i.e. Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*, Joyce's *Twelve Blue*), and theory regarding the larger cultural conceptualizations connected with print media. Finding the digital revolution to be of great concern to many researchers both in the humanities and sciences, however, often led to roadblocks: lost books, missing books, or books already checked out. GIL Express came to the rescue on more than a few occasions.

Furthermore, this veteran English literature student even faced the trek to south campus to the Science Library. I accepted this mission to foreign territories, however, as a necessary risk of undertaking a project so closely derived from a scientific revolution. The very necessity of the journey drove home the underlying reality that writing, not just print, is a human technology.

Whereas print books often proved inaccessible, electronic works were ever available. Internet resources, however, presented their own difficulties. As a new and decentralized discipline, electronic literature eludes a single, unified archive. Though many valiant attempts have been

made by academics and archivists, ever-evolving markup languages and digital formats defy the existence of a stable, single source. The Electronic Literature Organization runs a fairly good archive of major digital works, but their collection only reflects those works by authors already studied by the small community of scholars in the fledging field. Furthermore, the ELO cannot account for the independent archives created and maintained at individual universities and institutes.

After meeting with Kristen Nielsen, my research took a more self-reflective approach. Where did my argument fall into the most recent conversation about electronic literature? Through a more focused attention on recently published articles, I identified the principle journals and publications, both print and electronic (many with forms in both media), that supported scholarship on literary productions in electronic format. Other journals and publications stressed the importance of print texts that reflect the changing media ecology, a term used by Hayles to describe the greater network in which all literary texts now interact.

The problem of terms, in and of itself, also posed complications. Spending the beginning of my research investigating “electronic literature” and “hypertext fiction,” I soon discovered that many scholars were using denotations like “multimedia texts” and “network fiction.” The dizzying variations of vocabulary often left me unsure of which terms were synonymous and which had significant semantic differences. Only through sheer volume of reading did I begin to gather a somewhat stable understanding of which terms coincided and which did not coincide.

The effort has paid off, however, as I have been led to decide for myself which terms are more fruitful descriptions for the field of electronic literature. Hayles’s term “the literary,” used to describe any artistic production associated with language, as well as “hypertext fiction” have become central ideas to my project. Once an effort to refine my search terms, these words now

constitute the backbone of my thesis and make a statement about the nuances I believe should be applied to future studies of electronic literature.

Beginning as a project about genre and the interaction of media and literature, my paper has come to reflect the research process itself. Deeply involved in how people access and experience text, my project reveals how media influences a reader's understanding of content. I certainly learned to appreciate this truth in fact, as I investigated it in theory, negotiating between print and electronic copy, printed bibliographies and Internet databases.

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CURO Accepted Abstract

Digital Proliferation: Discerning New Literary Genres Spawned by Digital Technology

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With the proliferation of digital technology in the past few decades, we have been bombarded by a superabundance of information. As a product of this proliferation, part of a cultural transformation that operates on a paradigm of hypertextuality, literature has changed extensively in both form and presentation. While poetic and dramatic modes have evolved with advances in digital technology, the development of narrative, as well as transformations in narrative theory as a result of hypertext fiction, more generally represents broad innovations in literary genres. Narrative predominantly performs the work of marrying print traditions with new digital media by revealing the affects of print literature on new electronic forms of fiction, as well as electronic influences on the print novel. As seen in Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, the print novel has become a cross-referential collage woven from an infinite variety of information. Prompted by the call of N. Katherine Hayles in her book *Electronic Literature*, this study responds to the need "to attend to the specificity of networked and programmable media while still drawing on the rich traditions of print literature and criticism." Following the approach of Walter J. Ong, who posited in the 1980s that the novel arose from the development of print technology and, to a greater extent, from the larger transformation of an entire worldview, this study answers the challenge of identifying new literary genres of narrative born from the intersection of print media and digital technology.