

Review of: "On Defining Electronic Literature within the Realm of Digital Art"

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This paper explores a very interesting subject. It intends to explore how technological changes to writing led to a computer-mediated literature whose works are increasingly hybrid and strongly multimodal, and that consequently blur traditional boundaries between literary works and other aesthetic forms. The aim of this paper is to draw “a demarcation line between literary works created on a new platform and other forms of computer-generated art by defining different functions intermediality serves in their composition”. The main conclusion, that I largely agree with, is that even if “electronic literature in many ways differs from paper-based literature, and additional skills and techniques are required for its composition, the main principle remains unchanged”. This points to the existence and relevance of a “literary perspective” in the creation and consumption of electronic literature, or to these works inheriting from a literary tradition that, even if intersected with several other traditions, remains dominant in their experience and interpretation.

The paper is, for the most part, well-written, although it could benefit from occasional revisions in style and form, as there are some minor grammatical issues — such as instances of “in” that should be “on”, and more than a few missing determiners — along with some missing words, references, and at least one broken link.

The paper starts by outlining a definition for electronic literature, where the author discusses the meaninglessness of terms including “digital” or “electronic” in a post-digital world. It then follows to discuss the features of electronic literature (that, whether or not we like the designation, is the most common name given to the format) — it is code-based, ergodic, non-linear, interactive, etc. Throughout this section, it is never very clear whether all these features are required to classify something as electronic literature or not. This question would benefit from a more detailed discussion.

The paper then follows to a section dedicated to the “Variety of Multimodal Forms of Electronic Literature”. This section header is positioned awkwardly, as it follows a paragraph introducing the Electronic Literature Collection that should perhaps belong in this section already. The section then tries to illustrate the diversity of the field, mostly by describing general traits instead of discussing and analysing case studies — that I expected to be found within the aforementioned Electronic Literature Collection... This, in turn, leads to an analysis of the poietic shifts created by technological changes, closing by pointing to the idea of “synesthetic perception” of these works. Confounding multimodality with synesthesia is not particularly productive in this context, as many publications have already argued.

The next section argues that “Electronic literature is inherently multimodal mainly due to a combination of modes of artistic expression, or languages of different semiotic systems”, something that seems to imply that electronic literature may

never be reduced to just text on a screen or on another device. Of course, one can argue that interaction is always possible, but as Aarseth notes, interaction is not itself a requirement for ergodic texts. So it follows that either this argument is wrong or that if we accept it, we can then extend it to all literature, electronic or not... I think this would merit more discussion. Then the discussion moves on to remediation and to a reading of Bolter and Grusin that seems to assume that remediated media do not change with the technological shift of remediation. This needs to be revised. The section also doesn't adequately distinguish intermedia from multimedia or multimodality (which are different things, of course).

The section "Electronic Literature and Platform Studies" discusses whether or not "electronic literature" should be seen as an umbrella term for several forms of expression in the computational realm, placing this text in line with authors that defend that electronic literature should be conceived of as a platform for multimodal experiments. Then the text questions whether or not it makes sense to speak of "genres" in forms of computer art, a concept that seems to be somewhat misplaced. Electronic literature itself may eventually be constituted of genres, but is not a genre of computer art, as much as literature is not a genre of visual arts, etc. In this section, the author brings for the first time to the discussion some works of electronic literature, something which is very welcome. However, these works are mostly named in order to support a small argument around narrative storytelling and are not critically analysed as one would expect. There is no discussion of post-digital literature or around the post-digital condition, a concept that is brought to the introduction but then apparently forgotten.

Finally, in "On Distinction of Electronic Literature from Other Forms of Computer Art," the author seeks to define a place for electronic literature within computer art, something they deem controversial. The author doesn't quite discuss why the idea is controversial, nor do they argue for the controversy actually existing (as there are hardly any references in this section besides those to the author's own works). The question of whether "literature in the electronic form still exists, or has it been transformed into an amorphous category, a form of computer art?" is not given a satisfactory answer, particularly because this section (and almost all of the paper) fails to discuss games, yet another field that satisfies the criteria for narrative text and that for the most part (with notable exceptions) are not texts or electronic literature. This connection is also explored by other authors, and demonstrating a familiarity with such work would be desirable.

In conclusion, although the text's goals are sound and well worthy of discussion, I find that this paper could be greatly improved by, among other things: 1) discussing the traditions of literature and other media (and I'm defining media here along the proposals of Henry Jenkins or Lisa Gitelman) that electronic literature draws on or departs from; 2) discussing in far more detail the concepts of intermediality, multimodality, and multimediality; 3) informing this discussion with an analysis/comparison of similar phenomena in print-based literature — after all, illustrated books and other multimodal forms have been abundant throughout history; 4) incorporating more analysis of case studies, for which the Electronic Literature Collection is a wonderful source; 5) engaging with contemporary discourse around the topic: The paper lists a reasonably large number of references that are somewhat dated. The most recent references are by the author or are works included in the Electronic Literature Collection and therefore not so much references as they are case studies. Most other references are 10+ years old. Of course, citing older sources is not a problem in itself, especially when among those are foundational texts such as Aarseth's or Hayles's, but not engaging with the current discourse on a field that has at

least one dedicated yearly conference and several other events and journals that intersect it seems to be quite a fragility within this work.