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Author(s): Koskimaa, Raine; Rosario, Giovanna Di; Eskelinen, Markku

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ELECTRONIC LITERATURE PUBLISHING PRACTICES – DISTINCT TRADITIONS
AND COLLABORATING COMMUNITIES

Raine Koskimaa, Markku Eskelinen & Giovanna Di Rosario

1. Introduction to the Survey Electronic Literature Publishing and Distribution in Europe

In this chapter, the findings and outcomes of the Publishing Electronic Literature in Europe
report and related seminar, held at the University of Jyväskylä in March 2011, are
summarized and discussed[1]. In the survey, electronic literature refers to "works with
important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the
stand-alone or networked computer." (Eskelinen & Di Rosario 2012, 6) In this definition, it is
significant that both digitized print literature and print-like digital literature -- so-called e-
books -- is excluded. There are essential similarities in the cultural and commercial status of
electronic literature in the 30 European countries[2] the survey managed to cover. It is possible
that some major players in the field are not acknowledged, but it is unlikely that their forms
of publishing practices would constitute a major counter-example to the findings discussed
here. (ibid., 5)

This survey covers most of Europe. The three main borderline areas are Russia, the Ukraine,
and some newly independent countries in the Balkans. Russia is partly covered through
additional resource (see Fedorova 2012).

As there are no systematically gathered materials on the topic pre-existing, the report is by
necessity partly a historical account on the development of the electronic literature scene in
various European countries. We are, however, concentrating here on the publication
processes and procedures of electronic literature and not writing the history of European
electronic literature. That would be a major task in itself, and there is an attempt at such

[1] The whole report, authored by Markku Eskelinen and Giovanna Di Rosario, is available online:
https://jyx.jyu.fi/dspace/bitstream/handle/123456789/40316/978-951-39-4945-7.pdf?sequence=1.
[2] Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece,
Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal,
Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom.

history (or rather, histories) ongoing in the *Cybertext Yearbook*[3], where articles on the histories of Catalan, Croatian, German, Polish, Russian, and Slovene electronic literature have been published so far. The ELMCIP Knowledge Base, in future, may also serve to present a thorough account of the European (but also global) electronic literatures. Christopher Funkhouser's *Prehistoric Digital Poetry. An Archaeology of Forms* (2007) is an important account of the early forms of electronic literature.

2. Main Findings and Conclusions from the Report

In the early phase of the survey on the publishing of electronic literature in Europe, it became evident that an author's non-commercial self-publication dominates the field. Also important is the closely related, a bit more institutionalized, form of publications of a literary group (such as Perfokarta in Poland or Infolipo in Switzerland). Multimedia literary works have in some cases been commercially published on CDs and DVDs, but mainly, electronic literature is clearly a community and not a market driven scene. (Eskelinen & Di Rosario 2012, 52)

Outside France and its history of online and offline literary journals publishing electronic literature, we didn't come across a single review or journal that was designed solely for publishing electronic literature. It is much more typical that e-lit is published together with scholarly papers, net art, or digitized literature, especially with sound, visual and concrete poetry. (ibid., 47)

We have identified certain patterns in e-lit publishing and distribution in Europe. In a few countries there does not seem to be electronic literature at all (Romania, Greece, and Luxemburg). In the former Eastern Europe except Poland (Hungary, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia), in the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), and in the former Yugoslavia (Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia) as well as in Iceland and Ireland, self publications by authors existed but national portals were not found. Somewhat surprisingly the pattern was the same in Italy, although there has been some attempts at a database on Italian experimental literature including electronic literature. In the Nordic countries (except

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[3] Http://cybertext.hum.jyu.fi

Sweden and Iceland) we did find the combination of regional and international portals and authors' websites. However, as the scope of the regional Elinor portal covers Sweden, too, it can be included it in the same pattern as its Nordic neighbors. (ibid., 52)

The biggest European nations and languages (in population size and the amount of native speakers respectively: English, French, German, Spanish, Polish, Italian) dominate the e-lit publishing scene, although there are important differences within this group of six languages and language areas. The major portals and the most important reviews, the few commercial publications, publishers and e-lit collections, and almost every competition take place in these languages. It is easy to list the few exceptions: Slovenia (close ties between electronic literature and new media art); Portugal (one major review); Norway (one competition and regional portal); and Finland (one major international portal and several translated works of electronic literature). (ibid., 52)

There are five main characteristics of e-lit publishing and distribution in Europe. First, with a very few exceptions it does not constitute a commercial, but instead a community-centered activity. Secondly, most e-lit that satisfies the criteria used in the survey is freely accessible or downloadable on the Internet. Thirdly, as electronic literature is often seen in the continuum of 20th century experimental and avant-garde literature, it is culturally in the margins of more mainstream literary practices or even completely separated from them. Fourthly, so far the ongoing technological changes in the commercial publishing world, including for example the competition among publishers, teleoperators, bookstores, and hardware and software manufactures over the digital marketing and distribution channels of literature (cf. portable reading devices such as Kindle and tablet computers such as iPad) didn't seem to be closing the gap between electronic literature and mainstream literary practices. Fifth, institutionally various e-lit communities were supported by or intertwined with either the academic (creative writing programs, scholar-authors, presentations at conferences etc.) or the art world (museums and galleries that may or may not get public funding). (ibid., 53)

[Table 1.]

The lack of commercial publications and publishers effectively de-centralizes the scene and leaves e-lit authors with three basic types of publication possibilities: self-publication, publication in portals if such structures exist (in many ways this is just a form of networked self-publication), and publication in e-lit journals. Two additional options were only available to some authors: museums and galleries prefer works that are as much literature as visual arts (text-based installations, textual sculptures, kinetic works, digital multimedia). Publications in e-lit collections such as the two existing ELO ones in the USA seem to be something that may happen in major European languages later in this decade. (ibid., 54) The ELMCIP Anthology (edited by Maria Engberg, Talan Memmott & David Prater), primarily designed as a pedagogical tool, with its eighteen works in ten languages, leads the way on this front.

[Table 2]

It seems clear that electronic literature is not a market-driven literary phenomenon, but a community driven scene with an accompanying set of aesthetic, social and cultural values and practices. Although e-lit is isolated from most of the trends and concerns of mainstream publishing industries, it is close to and sometimes almost inseparable from other literary avant-gardes using the variety of non-digital media. In this respect its cultural position could be described a niche within a niche. Quite ironically, this exemption from media attention and monetary exchange and the strong emphasis on aesthetic and social motivation may help to guarantee the creativity of these communities especially as literary canons, editorial constraints, stable publishing structures, production and distribution costs, and copyright laws do not play a decisive or inhibiting role in most e-lit activities. At the same time, they do not either play an enabling role in cases requiring marketing or other support which may also limit the field of innovations. (ibid., 54)

Electronic poetry, however, with its many forms, genres, practices and venues seems to be an exception. The production numbers of e-poetry are on a level that is capable of supporting and justifying the existence of several reviews, journals, and both national and international competitions. It has a long and diverse history that merits collecting, some of its intermedial forms can be circulated and presented in non-literary contexts, and last but not least e-poetry in this century constitutes a truly international scene of writing. In fact, one may even

polemically ask if there is electronic literature outside e-poetry anymore. Even if the activity would be strongly focused on e-poetry, that should not be a problem. After all poetry is culturally and institutionally defendable, supportable and expandable as literature or art or both. (ibid., 55)

3. Reflections on the Survey

As part of the E-lit Publishing survey, an interim version of the report was presented and discussed in the ELMCIP Seminar at the University of Jyväskylä in March 2011. In addition to the ELMCIP researchers, several external experts were invited to give feedback to the process[4].

As community driven publication activity, the electronic literature publishing has not taken any clear stance towards open access, or, the free and open source software (FOSS) movements, as Kai Ekholm, the Director of the Finnish National Library, noted in his comment to the report. Some of the authors have employed Creative Commons licensing, and most notably, CC licensing has been adopted by the Electronic Literature Collections and the ELMCIP Anthology. This may be seen as a shortcoming, a lack of respect towards the value of one's own (or one's own reference group's) creative work and potential interest outside of the direct circle of acquaintances and colleagues. There might be need for education in intellectual property rights issues for electronic literature authors and publishers. On the other hand, it may as well be, that the lack of interest towards intellectual property rights is related to the nature of e-lit works often not classifiable as stable and well-defined "works".

Promoting open source practices would bear important advantages for the long term accessibility of the e-lit productions. Keeping the source code open would significantly improve possibilities for migrating the works to new platforms and thus improve their

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[4] Invited guests were: Philippe Bootz, Laura Borras, Nia Davies, Kai Ekholm (could not attend but sent e-mail comments), Peggy Hughes, George P. Landow, Mark Marino, Marko Niemi, and Beat Suter. The presentations and discussions can be viewed at the ELMCIP Vimeo repository.

accessibility. Open source code would also allow better chances for derivative works, which, in a community oriented activity, is an important avenue for new creations[5].

Mark Marino raised the question of the usefulness of nationality-based divisions in the "postnational era". While it is certainly important to consider the need to maintain and foster national divisions in the e-lit publishing world in the future perspective, it is very much in evidence that in Europe, there are distinct electronic literature traditions based on nationality and language. And not only that, but also regional emphases are visible, in that there are regional funds to support electronic literature writing and publishing. The most noteworthy example of this is the Viñaros Electronic Literature Prize, funded by the Spanish city of Viñaros.

The methodological choices in the report do lead to certain favored approaches. There is a tendency to look for national lineages, how certain traditions are formed and passed along. Whereas this is a necessary step in understanding the larger picture of electronic literature publishing in Europe, it may have the consequence of excluding some more independent and more extreme cases out of the account. This is certainly a genuine concern for a study within the framework of "creativity and innovation in practice", if the most innovative practitioners are either not recognized (because they are not part of the lineages), or, not accepted in to the account (because they are seen as "something else"). This may also be the nature of community centered action more generally. Once the electronic literature community has taken its form, it reinforces certain, possibly implicit, definitions of what is understood as proper electronic literature. To quite large extent, this problem is tackled through the acknowledgement that electronic literature is brought together through several communities, a situation which is addressed in the report (opening the survey towards the visual arts and gallery presentation oriented authors, for example, or discussing at length the omission of MOO and interactive fiction from the survey), so that there is not just one monolithic e-lit community but a congregation of differently oriented sub groups.

What is, and what is not, electronic literature, then? The so-called digital life, or, digital life writing, for example, in many cases borders creative writing practices found in electronic literature. Digital life writing is also another form of community driven action. Inevitably, there will always be a grey area, where electronic literature ceases to be the dominant concept

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[5] A case in point would be Nick Montfort's poem generator *Taroko Gorge*, modified first by Scott Rettberg as *Tokyo Garage*, and with several additional modifications up to this date.

and some other conceptualizations will be more fruitful. It may be a question of framing, some of digital life writing probably is written with such artistic intentions that is should be counted in e-lit, whereas most of it is not. From the perspective of publishing, however, this should really not make a difference, as digital life writing is community driven activity in a very similar way as e-lit publishing. One exception might be small-scale commercial dimension in some life blogging, through product placement and other advertisement practices.

One could also question, as Markku Eskelinen in the discussion did, if there even is such a thing as global electronic literature scene, so strong the national traditions seem to be. Scholarship is a different matter, and the research field is more global (even though Asia is a bit apart from the scene), which may to some extent distort the image regarding creative work where the national traditions play more important role. But the findings in the report, even if accepting the methodological bias favoring national/language divisions, quite strongly speak on behalf of the importance of national scene versus global e-lit scene.

Translation, then, is a crucial question. As Nia Davies from the organization Literature across Frontiers[6] reminded, lack of translations is a big challenge already in the print literature (especially so in the Anglo-American world), which is one of the main motivations behind Literature across Frontiers to begin with. With e-lit the challenge is even harder, with less funding, less resources and with the added technical complexities. One of the main modes of work of Literature across Frontiers is to arrange translation workshops, and that is something which the electronic literature community should also foster. First steps towards this has already been taken with the Translating E-literature Conference arranged by the University of Paris 8 in June 2012.

4. New Platforms, New Distribution Models

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[6] Literature Across Frontiers (LAF) is a European platform for literary exchange, translation and policy debate, http://lafpublications.org/

Electronic literature and, especially, related technologies are constantly developing. Within the two years since the Publishing Electronic Literature in Europe seminar we can already detect certain important changes. First of all, the tablet devices and large touch screen smart phones have permeated the developed world. One can argue, that these devices, for the first time, offer a proper platform to publish and experience electronic literature. Also, the content distribution services built for these devices, like Apple's AppStore, Android Market, or Windows Store, offer a possibility for small scale commercial distribution of works, without the need to have a contract with a traditional publishing house.

So far it seems that tablets and smart phones have been adopted more eagerly for publishing digitalized literature - the revolution started with the Kindle has led to a situation where reading of digital books is, for the first time, seriously challenging print literature. In electronic literature scene, however, such shift is not really detectable. The Hyperliterature Exchange[7], a British site, promotes and encourages "the sale of hyperliterature - electronic literature, cyberliterature, hypertext, new media literature, nonlinear literature, digital poetry, Flash poetry, etc." and has in its catalogue digital fiction and poetry published by small publishers in France, Canada, Australia, and USA or by the authors themselves. As far as we can tell this enterprise is unique in Europe, and it, or something in similar vein, might develop into a Spotify or Netflix type of service for electronic literature in future.

One interesting example of the new type of electronic literature publishing comes from genre fiction, in this case science fiction. Best-selling sci-fi authors Neal Stephenson and Greg Bear, with a small group of fellow authors, started to publish a collaborative fiction titled *The Mongoliad* under the Subutai Corporation[8]. The work was serially published as chapters of a browser-based e-book, or alternatively, as additions to a mobile device applet, through a system called PULP (Personal Ubiquitous Literature Platform). The work is multimedial in that the text chapters are accompanied with illustrations and video clips. Readers have to register themselves to gain access to the content, and with a subscription fee, it is possible to buy wider access to the contents, as well as a higher degree in the community ranking. The readers are actively encouraged to provide feedback and even their own content to the work itself (such as illustrations) or to the accompanying Mongoliad Pedia. Contributing to the Pedia is another way to proceed in the community ranking. This is an experiment relevant to

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[7] http://hyperex.co.uk/index.php There are 132 titles in the catalogue (27.3.2013), prices ranging from free to 99.99 Can$ (for a CD ROM). There seem to be also print books discussing e-lit included in the list.
[8] https://mongoliad.com/

the e-lit publication discussed here in many ways. Most importantly, science fiction is very much a community, the fandom, centered world. In *Mongoliad*, a middle way between traditional publishing and purely amateur driven fanzine publication is sought after. Also, the subscription-based access, with choices from free registration to institutional membership, provides a range of service comparable to many commercial online content vendors (from a limited free access to premium membership).

Despite the near-professional design of *The Mongoliad*, the work is pestered with bugs and incompatibility problems across platforms. Also, the community-driven action seems to have diminished quite soon after initial excitement. *The Mongoliad* has also been published as multi-volume print book (available also in Kindle edition) since 2012. It might be that the online *Mongoliad*, after all, ended up mainly as promotion for the print book. Pessimistically one might see this as a failure despite there being an already formed readership available, even though it is too early to really say how the experiment ultimately turns out. Optimistically, the *Mongoliad* could be seen as a symptom of more general interest towards the kind of expanded writing e-lit is representing.

5. The Impact of the ELMCIP

The contribution of the ELMCIP Project, and especially the launching of the ELMCIP Knowledge Space have already started making a difference in the European e-lit publishing. What Simon Biggs said about the situation of e-lit in the UK some years ago, still holds true about e-lit in Europe: "It remains the case that whilst there are many artists and authors active in electronic literature in the UK, if you wish to access their work then you generally have to visit their personal websites. This means that the responsibility for the maintenance and dissemination of such artworks remains with the authors themselves." (Biggs, 2010) Here, however, the Knowledge Base and the ELMCIP Anthology are changing the situation. The Knowledge Base, at least in its current form, does not answer to the challenge of long term preservation of the works themselves, but at least there now is one place where a potential e-lit reader can find if not all, at least a big portion of the European e-lit. The Knowledge Base, then, may also serve as a promotion channel for e-lit publishers.

The works selected to the ELMCIP Anthology are only a small fraction of the works written in Europe, but at least for these works the Anthology offers an additional archiving feature, not to mention the pedagogical materials attached to the Anthology, providing a new, educational publication of its own.

What comes to building a comprehensive picture of electronic literature publishing and distribution in Europe, the survey discussed here serves as starting point. All of the data gathered in the report have been transferred to the ELMCIP Knowledge Base, and new information is added constantly there. It is our aim, that in future, this kind of overviews could be generated easily from the Knowledge Base, without the need for laborious detective work as was the case with this report.

Recommendations

Establishing a European E-Lit Awards. Prior and existing e-lit awards and prizes have managed to bring visibility to e-lit and its authors, but the range of languages represented in any given prize has been highly limited. Open European E-Lit Award could help open and bridge the nation-based e-lit communities.

Multilingual Anthologies. The Anthologies serve to answer, partially at least, to the long-term preservation issue of e-lit, and they play an important pedagogical role as educational resources. The ELMCIP Anthology should be maintained and new volumes published regularly.

Translation workshops. Would help to maintain the linguistic diversity of European e-lit scene. Could be arranged in connection to the ELMCIP Anthology.

E-lit works should be included in public and academic libraries. Pilot projects could be established, for example using the edited anthologies, where a library would provide additional information and support for readers interested in getting acquainted with e-lit.[9]

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[9] Currently there is one project along these lines under way at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, with several Danish Libraries involved.

Establishing an international, multilingual online journal focusing on e-lit, which would also publish translated works. Critical writing could also be published. Funding would be needed to ensure an up-to-date technical platform and long-term maintenance, to have at least one paid editor to provide professional quality, and ideally, to pay writing fees for contributing authors.

Subscription-fee based commercial repository of electronic literature might offer a mid-way between voluntary, free access, community based publication, and full-scale commercial publication.

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The five main characteristics of e-lit publishing and distribution in Europe
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institutionally various e-lit communities are intertwined with either the academic or the art world

Table 1.

Three basic types of e-lit publication possibilities
self-publication
publication in portals
publication in e-lit journals
Additionally: exhibitions in museums and galleries

Table 2.