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Introducing the ELMCIP Electronic Literature Knowledge Base

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About the ELMCIP Project

Focusing on a particular creative community, of electronic literature practitioners, the central research question of the ELMCIP collaborative research project is how creative communities of practitioners form within transnational and transcultural contexts, within a globalised and distributed communications environment. We seek to gain insight into and understanding of the social effects and manifestations of creativity. Our research seeks to exploit the characteristics of electronic literature in order to inquire into how a broader range of networked creative communities can develop.

In pursuit of purely objective research goals, it might have been possible to frame such a research project externally to the field itself, for example by limiting the study to ethnographic research conducted by disinterested social scientists. While an ethnographic study is an element of the project, however, ELMCIP does not pretend to a false sense of objectivity. Our researchers are active players, as scholars, writers, and artists, in the field that is the subject of our research. Our interest is not simply to study a field that has already been established and understood as completely formed, but rather to better understand the conditions for the formation and advancement of network-based creative communities by actively engaging in the work of better understanding and developing a field in which we as researchers are already actively engaged. The research outcomes are therefore not limited to cultural analysis, but include the development of research infrastructure for electronic literature.

The collaborative research upon which the project is based will result in deliverables including a series of seminars, each examining electronic literature from a perspective of a different cultural context. The seminar topics include Electronic Literature Communities (at the University

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of Bergen), Publishing Models for Electronic Literature (at the University of Jyväskylä), Electronic Literature Pedagogy (at Blekinge Institute of Technology), Electronic Literature and New Media Art (at the University of Ljubljana, next week), Digital Poetics (at the University of Amsterdam, in December), and Performing Electronic Literature (at University College Falmouth). The concluding event of the project will be an international conference focused on the themes of the project, and including a performance and exhibition component, hosted by Edinburgh College of Art and New Media Scotland. In addition to the individual research conducted and published by the principal investigators (PIs) and co-investigators, outcomes will include: a survey of electronic literature publishing venues in Europe, the publication of an online and DVD anthology of electronic literature, which will include pedagogical materials, publication of reports on all of the individual projects, conference proceedings, an ethnographic study of electronic literature communities, an exhibition catalogue, and the publication of several special issues of academic journals correlated to the research themes of the project. Linking all of these outcomes together and the central work package of the University of Bergen project team is the ELMCIP Knowledge Base (http://elmcip.net/knowledgebase).

I will in this essay first provide readers with the project description for the Knowledge Base, and then move to an update on the work that has taken place in developing and implementing the platform since the project began in June 2010. Both the development of the platform itself and its contents are ongoing processes, which will continue through the length of the ELMCIP project to June 2013, and beyond.

Objectives of the ELMCIP Electronic Literature Knowledge Base

The online Knowledge Base for ELMCIP serves as a central web resource for the Collaborative Research Project (CRP), keeping participants and stakeholders informed about progress on the project, events and deliverables as the CRP proceeds, and will serve as a open distribution mechanism for research generated by the project. The Knowledge Base will also more extensively serve as a centralized, searchable archive of information about electronic literature and related creative communities. The Knowledge Base is not simply as a set of information pages about the CRP but also a research outcome and distribution platform for the CRP, serving to widen the audience of the CRP and to increase the impact of the research conducted by the CRP. In developing the Knowledge Base, our objectives are:

Breadth: The Knowledge Base will be as comprehensive as possible, including presentation materials from all of the seminars conducted under the CRP, downloadable versions of articles produced as a

result of the research, downloadable versions of the reports, exhibition catalogue, and ethnographic study, online versions of the works or documentation included in the exhibition DVD and the anthology, information about active and historical network-based creative communities, information about individual works of electronic literature, and information about scholarship about electronic literature.

Granularity: Rather than simply redistributing PDF files of research and reports conducted as part of the CRP, the Knowledge Base extends the bibliographic usefulness and searchability of the research conducted by the CRP. Structured data about individual works, important critical and theoretical articles, individual authors, institutions, and events are harvested from the research on an ongoing basis as individual records, thus resulting in a useful searchable bibliographic resource.

Open Access: All information entered into the Knowledge Base will be available on a free open access basis. Whenever possible, knowledge produced by the project will be released with a permissive Creative Commons license or into the public domain.

Sustainability: In order to make the Knowledge Base as durable as possible, we use a widely supported open source CMS and database platform, drupal. The University of Bergen is further committed to host and support the Knowledge Base for a minimum of five years beyond the project period. We will also take steps to assure that the project is archived by the Internet Archive (archive.org) and by the Norwegian National Library, and will therefore be freely available for the foreseeable future.

Usability: The Knowledge Base is designed and implemented according to Web usability best practices, emphasizing clarity, searchability, and accessibility.

The Importance of Cross-Referencing and Capturing the Activities of the Field

In selecting and specifying the record types for the KB and including critical writing, authors, publishers, organizations, events, and teaching resources as well as creative works, we are trying to make it possible to document and make available for study the activities of a field of practice that operates differently from traditional academic or artistic fields. Theory, practice, and critical activities are deeply intertwined in e-lit. Events: exhibitions, festivals, and conferences, also play a different role, in that they are often the primary way of releasing a new work, and building interest in it. So we want to document how works are presented and received, and in what context this happens.

In order to show all these connections between activities, we have allowed for extensive cross-referencing in the Knowledge Base. We ask people creating records of critical writing, for instance, to enter references to the creative works that article addresses. As soon as they do, that reference also, automatically, appears on the record for the work itself. Likewise, if someone created a teaching resource record for a course that made use of a particular work, it would become visible on the record of the work itself.

Over time, all these cross references begin to allow us to see how the practices of a creative community and its related scholarly community are building together in a way that no individual account could otherwise allow. Although not the primary goal of this project, we think it will allow for the type of scholarship Franco Morretti describes as "distance reading." In addition to tracking how the reception of an individual work occurred and changed over time, we might, for instance be able to track the lifespan of a particular genre, practice, or concept in both creative and critical spheres. Once the documentation in the Knowledge Base reaches a critical mass, a number of different information visualizations and new reading strategies become feasible.

International cooperation and field building

We are designing the KB to allow for interoperability with other online databases used within the field of electronic literature, including the ELO's Electronic Literature Directory, NT2's French-language electronic literature database, the Po.Ex archive of experimental Portuguese literature, a planned Australian online catalogue of electronic literature, and others. Because electronic literature is a new field, and common bibliographic standards and archival practices have yet to be standardised, we will consult with other international research consortia and organizations on developing shared standards and practices as the project proceeds and the database is developed.

In December 2010, we had the first meeting of the Consortium for Electronic Literature (CELL), in Sydney Australia, including members of the ELMCIP project, the ELO, the Australian Creative Nation project, and the Siegen, Germany Media Upheavals project. At a follow-up meeting in Bergen this spring, we focused on database specific issues and additionally included representatives of the Brown University digital archive, the Portuguese experimental literature archive, and NT2.

At the Sydney meeting we agreed to some interoperability goals for the databases:

As a first step, we have agreed as a general principle to make records in all the databases available on an open-access, Creative Commons licensed basis, and to allow each of the databases to reuse and develop records from any of the other participating databases.

Further, and somewhat more complex to implement, is an agreement to share machine-readable short entries for works of electronic literature and related critical writing, and to do so in an automated way. These records will further be "watermarked" to identify the source of the record.

We will develop a common format for entries describing works of electronic literature and work together, along with other similar international projects, to develop an international bibliographic standard to document works of electronic literature.

We have agreed to work to implement a mechanism to allow searching across all of the active databases from within the interface of one.

Finally we agreed that we should find a common archive in which to mirror all of the databases, and to share bibliographic information within any of the databases if any one should go offline due to a loss of funding or any other circumstance.

In Bergen in May 2011, we began the work of moving from agreements in principle to reality. This is work that will take some time, but which is already beginning to bear fruit.

From documentation to archiving

The ELMCIP Knowledge Base is not primarily an archive, but as we have proceeded with the work of documenting this field, the thinness of the boundary between those two activities becomes more apparent. The ELMCIP project includes metadata-level documentation and some archival materials, such as .PDF files, source code of some works, audio and video documentation of presentations and so forth. Projects such as the Brown literary arts digital archive, the Portuguese experimental literature archive, and even the ELO's Electronic Literature Collection are more focused on archiving and preserving code and assets in ways that make them durable and accessible beyond metadata and descriptions. If it is beyond the scope of the current Knowledge Base platform, we are beginning to consider how this documentation work can connect with and facilitate the work of archiving repositories. As we consider the potentialities of the network we are together building in the Consortium for Electronic Literature, first by building a network of cooperation, of people talking and working together, and then of documentation databases operating and communicating with each other, a network of archives, repositories of electronic literature accessible from and to each other, seems a necessary and logical progression we can work to bring about.