Electronic Literature

New Horizons for the Literary

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For additional resources in teaching electronic literature, visit:

http://newhorizons.eliterature.org

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This book, with its related website and accompanying CD featuring volume 1 of the *Electronic Literature Collection*, is intended to help electronic literature move into the classroom. For someone teaching a course on contemporary literature, for example, it can be used along with a unit on electronic literature as an increasingly important part of the twenty-first-century canon. The book may also serve courses devoted to the digital arts or those focusing specifically on electronic literature. While the *Electronic Literature Collection* is also available at the Electronic Literature Organization’s website (http://collection.eliterature.org), its inclusion here is meant to facilitate access for students who do not find it convenient to have internet connections while on campus or at other times. There is also a long tradition in the literary community of cherishing the book as a physical object, and the CD, with its silk-screened original design, helps usher that tradition into the digital realm.

While accommodating readers new to electronic literature, the book is also structured to appeal to those familiar with the digital arts and electronic literature. The initial chapter, to my knowledge the first attempt to survey systematically the entire field of electronic literature, identifies the major genres and central theoretical issues. The novice will find it a useful introduction to the diversity and scope of electronic literature, while the experienced practitioner may discover some works, writers, or issues she has not otherwise encountered.
The second chapter proposes a theoretical framework in which electronic literature can be understood as a practice that mediates between human and machine cognition; the term I suggest for this orientation is “intermediation,” also discussed in my recent book My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts. Its implications are explored through discussions of Michael Joyce’s *afternoon: a story*, an early work heavily influenced by print paradigms compared to Joyce’s later Web work *Twelve Blue*, along with work by digital artist Maria Mencia and *The Jew’s Daughter* by Judd Morrissey. The third chapter broadens the discussion to consider the contexts in which electronic literature is created, played, interpreted, and taught. Focusing on whether the machine or the body should provide the primary theoretical ground for understanding electronic literature—approaches represented respectively by German media theorist Friedrich A. Kittler and American theorist of embodiment Mark B. N. Hansen—chapter 3 argues that both perspectives are incomplete in themselves. They require a third approach focusing on the intermediation that inextricably entwines body and machine, without giving either absolute theoretical priority. The approach is exemplified through discussions of Talan Memmott’s *Lexia to Perplexia* and Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries’ *Nippon*. The fourth chapter further elucidates this approach by considering the ways in which the embodied practices of electronic literature revalue computational practice, illustrated with discussions of William Poundstone’s *Project for Tachistoscope*, Millie Niss’s *Sundays in the Park*, and John Cayley’s *Translation* and related works. The final chapter, ambitiously titled “The Future of Literature: Print Novels and the Mark of the Digital,” argues that almost all contemporary literature is already digital in the sense that it has existed mostly as digital files. Digitality leaves its mark on many contemporary experi-
mental print novels through visual and graphic strategies that require digital processing, as well as through narrative plots that explore the implications for literature and language of having computer code underlie virtually all contemporary communications except face-to-face talk. Novels discussed include Salvador Plascencia’s *The People of Paper*, Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and Mark Danielewski’s brilliant hypertext novel *House of Leaves*.

Many of the electronic works discussed in these pages are also featured in the first volume of the *Electronic Literature Collection*. Co-edited by Nick Montfort, Scott Rettberg, Stephanie Strickland, and me, the *Collection* features sixty recent and new works of electronic literature, all offered under a Creative Commons license (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5) that allows the works to be freely shared, distributed, and transmitted as long as they are attributed, not used for commercial purposes, or altered. The *Collection* includes a searchable keyword index, comments by the author(s), and a brief introductory head note by the editors. Moreover, the *Collection* has been engineered to run cross-platform on Macintosh, PC, or Linux. The CD with the *Collection* is also available without cost from the Electronic Literature Organization, which sponsored the project.

The accompanying website for this book (http://newhorizons.eliterature.org), a collaboration between Christopher Mott, Jacob Burch, and me, offers resources for teaching courses on electronic literature, including sample syllabi, authors’ biographies, and several original essays, commissioned specifically for this project, that discuss such matters as navigation as a signifying strategy, finding and interpreting the code, architecture as trope and visualization, and a host of other topics relevant to understanding and interpreting electronic literature. We hope that teachers will find the website useful.
both for themselves as they construct their courses and for
their students as they encounter the new ways to experience
the literary art that electronic literature offers.

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