

Digital Narratives and Interactive Literary Texts: The Evolution of Electronic Literature

السرديات الرقمية والنصوص الأدبية التفاعلية : تطور الأدب الإلكتروني

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Abstract: This article analyses the radical shift in literary studies in today's digitalised age. It archives the drastic transformations of traditional literature, and theorises for a digitalised one. This shift is referred to now as Electronic Literature, and sometimes Digital Narratives. This paper provides a genealogical study to trace the transformation of literature's nature, genre, structures and forms. It also re-evaluate the concepts of reader participation, interactivity, authorship and literary criticism. The paper questions as well the ontological and epistemological efficacy of electronic literature. It puts into question the role of literary theories on Digital Narratives in revealing the efficiency of Electronic Literature in providing accurate, didactic and epistemological treatment of the vast, philosophical and ontological problems that literature has always been occupied with. It then concludes with providing avenues for future research in the field of electronic literature.

Keywords: Cybertext, Digital Narratives, Electronic Literature, Hypertext, Interactive Text.

ملخص: يحلل هذا المقال التحول الجذري في الدراسات الأدبية في العصر الرقمي اليوم. وهو يؤرشف التحولات الجذرية التي طرأت على الأدب التقليدي، وينظر للأدب الرقمي. ويشار إلى هذا التحول الآن باسم الأدب الإلكتروني، وأحياناً السرديات الرقمية. تقدم هذه الورقة البحثية دراسة جينولوجية لتتبع تحولات طبيعة الأدب وأنواعه وبناءه وأشكاله. كما أنها تعيد تقييم مفاهيم مشاركة القارئ والتفاعلية والتأليف والنقد الأدبي. وتتساءل الورقة كذلك عن الفعالية الأنطولوجية والمعرفية للأدب الإلكتروني. وتشكك في دور النظريات الأدبية حول السرديات الرقمية في الكشف عن كفاءة الأدب الإلكتروني في تقديم معالجة دقيقة وتعليمية ومعرفية للمشكلات الأنطولوجية والفلسفية الوجودية الواسعة التي طالما أفرح الأدب فيها. كما أنه يتساءل عن قدرة هذه النظريات في تقديم ادعاءات وتحليلات وحجج مكررة كتلك التي يقدمها الفلاسفة والنقاد الأدبيو.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النص السيرياني، والسرديات الرقمية، والأدب الإلكتروني، والنص التشعبي، والنص التفاعلي.

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1.Introduction:

The world has witnessed drastic transformations due to technological advancements, and literature has not been exempted. Digital literature has emerged as a new literary form influenced by technological progress, providing innovative and interactive reading experience. This new literary form relies on technology for its creation and distribution, blurring the boundaries of readership and authorship as the storyline changes depending on the interaction between readers and authors. A quality which has not entirely been appreciated by the community of literary critics. Traditionally, literature has been viewed as purely and innately a humanistic act of creation gathering human intellect, form and essence; a notion the Greeks referred to as humanism. With the emergence of Digital Literature, questions regarding traditional literature, its aesthetics, and limitations when it comes to form, genre and interaction and has arose. Commonly known as Interactive Digital Literature or Electronic Literature seems to offer a solution to the modern literary problem of interaction and reader-author relationship. However, this interactivity appears to jeopardizes the essence of literature as a field of knowledge produced by writers who happen to be philosophers, anthropologists and sociologists who investigate human nature, society, metaphysical and philosophical issues. In other words, Electronic literature dismantle the problem of interaction with literary content by rendering the reader the author of the literary text, but simultaneously it renders the reader and the author equal in terms of their intellect. This article aims to define electronic literature, encompassing its forms, genres and importance in contemporary literary criticism. This paper also addresses the conception of electronic literature highlighting the distinction between electronic literature and interactive digital literature. This research aims to unravel the historical development of electronic literature and the literary approaches used theorizing it. It then concludes with revealing the implications of electronic literature and its future. This paper employs literary genealogical approach as it aims to study the development of electronic literature and investigate its cultural, aesthetic and literary features in reference to traditional literature.

2. Beyond the Page: The Evolution of Electronic Literature

2.1 Conception of Electronic Literature and Digital Literature:

Electronic literature is a term encompassing a wide range of literary art forms that employ the affordances of digital media (Chetcuti 2020). It ranges from computer-generated literature, hypertext fiction, interactive fiction, literary video games, kinetic and interactive poetry, network writing, and literary works that employ virtual and augmented technologies (Rettberg 2018, p 169). The term “digital literature” is often used interchangeably, but “electronic literature” has a longer, institutional history and is more commonly used amongst academics in the field of Digital Humanities. According to Hayles (2008), almost all works of literature rely, to some extent, on digital technologies for their production, distribution, and consumption today. As such, “electronic literature is “‘born digital’, a first-generation digital object created on a computer and meant to be read on a computer” (Hayles 2008, p 3). This digital nature of electronic literature has led scholars in the field of electronic literature to distinguish between “digital literature” and “digitized literature.” In this sense, Hayles

(2008) argues that: “more than being defined by digitality, electronic literature is actively shaped by it” (p 43). E-books – works of print literature that have been made available on digital devices – thus do not count as electronic literature. In other words, the term “electronic literature” is more inclusive and accurate than “digital literature”. Electronic literature, which is also referred to as “digital narratives”, refers to literary works created exclusively for digital environment and cannot exist in print form. As for digital literature, it is more inclusive and broader as it includes both literary works that are available in digital format (electronic literature) and digitized versions of print texts. Digital literature, thus, can be born digital and digitized simultaneously. “Interactive Literature” or “Interactive Digital Literature” are other terms used interchangeably with digital literature. Interactive digital literature encapsulates the distinctive aspect of electronic literature: interactivity, with that of digital literature: digitisation. That is, interactive literature refers to literary works in digital form that require active engagements from the reader.

The problem of conceptualising electronic literature has been the topic of an epistemological debate amongst scholars in the field of digital humanities. Which term to use exactly (digital literature, electronic literature, digital narratives, or interactive digital literature) and for which context has been central. Cramer (2014) and Simanowski (2009) highlight the confusion these terms may provoke and contend that most works of electronic literature use modalities like sound and movement, which are known, colloquially, as digital. These modalities whether “connected literally or figuratively to computational electronic devices can be called ‘digital’” (Cramer 2014, p 20). As such, electronic literature is synonymous to digital literature technically. Similarly, Hayles (2008) and Bosma (2011) claim that the term “electronic literature” is to be used to describe literary forms that are born digital or digitised. The argument that electronic literature has emerged alongside technological advancements, was shaped by them, and evolved certain characteristics in response to technological features, particularly “interactivity”. In this sense, the concept electronic literature encapsulates the aspects of technology, digitisation and interactivity. For this reason, electronic literature is commonly used amongst academics as an umbrella term which refers to literary forms that can be classified as interactive digital literature, digital and electronic literature. This article aligns with the common trend in the field by using the term “electronic literature” as a multiple signifier denoting literary forms which are born digital and meant to be consumed digitally and those which have been and are digitised.

2.2 The Historical Development of Electronic Literature:

Throughout its production, electronic literature employed strategies and techniques such as montage, interactivity, proceduralism, and aleatorism. These techniques have been associated with the neo-avant-garde movement. Neo-avant-gardism is a postwar cultural movement that emerged in North America and Western Europe (Foster 2010). Its main aim was to challenge and dismantle narrative techniques and art forms which are “outdated” and cannot capture the technological and fast-paced nature of postwar culture and life. New techniques, narratives, forms and aesthetics were needed. Artists and scholars advocating neo-avant-gardism have worked to create new, “digital” aesthetics that are inclusive and various in terms of expression

and portraying the daily realities and challenges of contemporary people. In others words, the main concern of neo-avant-gardism was to depict the realities and experiences of people, focusing on individuality and freedom of expression without omission, interference or any linguistics or aesthetic rules. For them, these rules are outdated, repetitious, and “no rule governs the return of these devices of the 1920’s collage and assemblage, the readymade and the grid” (Foste 2010, p 6). This cultural revolution has led to the emergence of new terms, new paradigms and unorthodox conceptions and re-evaluation of dualisms including interactivity, the death of the author, metanarratives, author-reader relation, definition of text and literature. Of all these new concepts, the notion of the author has been radically transformed as the reader becomes the author himself/herself. This notion has been elaborated on by Derrida, Lacan and Foucault, but its implications have been realised through digital means. The author is not merely a creative writer writing about different themes; the author is the reader, the person who witnessed, experienced and survived the story being narrated and told. Due to digital techniques the author can interfere and change the course of the story and so is able to interact with the literature produced. Insomuch, the concepts of interactivity, hypertexts, cybertexts have emerged.² The development of these ideas and the evolution of electronic literature can be traced in four different stages.

Arguably, electronic literature as a field of study emerged in the 1980’s. However, Funkhouser (2007) claims that there were literary works that employed digital techniques before that time. In his book *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: An Archeology of Forms, 1959-1995*, Funkhouser (2007) documents early works of digital poetry, some of them which are no longer accessible. Electronic literature has thus been produced for more than fifty years, with the first known example being Christopher Strachey's 1952 love letter generator for the Manchester Mark I computer. Christopher used an early computer to generate random love letters, followed by Theo Lutz’s 1959 “Stochastische Texte” [A Text Generator] which was created to generate solutions for stochastic texts. Another example of early electronic literature is Gerrit Krol’s APPI: Automatic Poetry by Pointed Information (1971), a collection of poems that were co-created by the computer. The creators of these literary forms were originally engineers who has access to computers as these latter were not accessible to everyone. These examples spark the emergence of the “new author” figure; an author who is not creative writer, but rather an engineer who has access to technology. These works in addition to others mark the early stage of the historical development of electronic literature, a period of early foundation set between 1950s and 1970s. Although early computer-generated works have been collected in the international anthology *Computer Poems*, several others are no longer accessible.

In the 1970s and 1980s the term hypertext fiction has emerged. The term itself was coined in 1965 by Ted Nelson who is accredited for developing digital storytelling and introducing non-linear, interconnected texts. Hypertext fiction became very popular in the 1980s as people had access to personal computers. In 1986, Mark Bernstein founded Eastgate Systems, the first publisher of electronic literature, which sold works of hypertext fiction as well as the software

² This notion is to be explored in the section about forms and genres of electronic literature.

program StorySpace, which allowed users to create their own hypertext works (Pressman 2014, p 6). One of the first works of hypertext fiction created using StorySpace, was Micheal Joyce's *afternoon, a story* (1987). This work was significant because it did not only employ Nelson's developed non-linear storytelling, but also reader interactivity. His work marks the emergence of a new form of electronic literature: Interactive Fiction. This new form included text-based adventure games which required readers and players to type commands to progress through the story. This form was seen initially as a game and was later recognized as a form of electronic literature as the neo-avant-garde movement and its call for a redefinition and explorations of narrative techniques was at its peak (Ryan 2016).

At the peak of these demands and the rise of the Internet in the 1990s, electronic literature evolved dramatically. The increasing emergence of new platforms for authors, the incorporation of technological techniques like sound and movement have led to the emergence of new forms of electronic literature: multimedia and kinetic poetry. This new form is a digital poetry which employs interactivity of hyperfiction and interactive fiction with new digital techniques like sound and movement. Early examples of such form include Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995) which is a feminist hyperfiction of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and John Cayley's *Wind Sound* (2001). Electronic literature became more immersive as digital technology became more advanced. The rapid production of smartphones, tablets, electronic reading devices and the mass expansion of social platforms in 2010s signaled a new stage of electronic literature. Hypertext, interactive fiction and multimedia and kinetic poetry became increasingly popular and transformed as readers could blend these texts with visual aids and sound creating a multimedia, multisensory literary experience. These new electronic literary forms are significant also in terms that the storyline is always open for more engagement and editing. These stories could never end and some of them remain ongoing. An example of this is Kate Pullinger's *Inanimate Alice* which was launched in 2005 and remains ongoing to this date. Electronic literature's development is strictly associated with technological advances. This creates a challenge for academics who attempt to theorize this field as it seems, epistemologically, quite difficult to provide a scrutinized, comprehensive and satisfying reading of electronic literature as a field of study. One approach to theorise this field has been contended by Hayles (2008), Carmer (2014), Rettberg (2018) and Flores (2019) who view treating electronic literature as a cultural phenomenon to be the best approach to theorize the field.

3. Theorising Electronic Literature

The first theoretical works about electronic literature focused on its form. Scholars made connections between hypertext fiction and poststructuralist theories of Derrida, Foucault, Lacan and Kristeva (Landow 1992). They argued that electronic literature blurs the boundaries between reader and author, because the reader can intervene the progress of the story. Commenting on this, Ryan (2016) explains that: "hypertext was supposed to implement the ideas of Kristeva, Foucault, Deleuze and Eco on topics like intertextuality, rhizomatic organization, openness and self-renewability, and the disappearance of the distinction between reader and author" (p 336). These notions combined mark what is known as experimental literature, a contemporary approach to the production of postwar literature and culture. Connecting this concept to electronic literature, Rettberg (2018) suggests that:

“electronic literature is fundamentally experimental literature” (p 6). It is experimental in the sense that it involves discovering new literary forms which do not conform to traditional devices, it deconstructs rules of language, syntax and conventional storytelling and also opens more room for interaction and engagement which enable readers to bypass the author-reader dualism. This, according to Aarseth (1999) unfolds with what electronic literature is and suggests a new term which encapsulates this literary trend. He argues that electronic literature is a form of “ergodic literature”, which he defines as literature where “nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text” (Aarseth 1999, p 2). This approach to theorising electronic literature is epistemological. Another approach was adopted by later generation of scholars in the field and it is mainly archaeological and ontological. The focus of these scholars was tracing the historical development of electronic literature and how it shifts depending on the ever-changing realities shaped and controlled by technological advances. The focal point was to study electronic literature not in relation to previous philosophical and literary schools like poststructuralism, postmodernism and deconstruction, but rather as a techno-cultural phenomenon. A phenomenon which evolved over three different generations.

Hayles (2008) argues that there are two “generations” of electronic literature. Text and hyperlinks define the first generation, which existed before the internet. The second generation makes use of the audiovisual techniques of the personal computer and the affordances of the World Wide Web. These works are characterized by the use of (moving) images, sound and kinetic typography. Hayles' division of the genre into generations implies a distinct division between hypertext and other electronic writing genres. A notion which has been the point of objection by many scholars like Funkhouser (2007) who argues that electronic literature's foundations “mechanically and conceptually built in the decades before personal computers, were firmly established by the 1990s – before the WWW came into existence” (p, 1).

The second generation of electronic literature is marked by the emergence of new wave of scholarship around the phenomenon. The main objective of this generation was to provide an overview and create an electronic literary canon and “institutionalise” the field of electronic literature. More interdisciplinary approaches have been used to understand electronic literature like literary theory, media studies, cultural studies and computer sciences. These efforts culminated in the emergences of new literary theories like Hypertext Theory which according to Landow(1997) and Botler (1992) disrupts the linearity of traditional print narratives, challenging traditional authorship which enables the reader to actively engages and construct the narrative rather than simply receive it. This theory has been considered one of the influential theories in the field of electronic literature, followed by Non-Linearity, Interactivity and Reader Engagement theory which states electronic literature is mainly interactive and meant to be so as it requires participation from the reader through clicking, typing or navigating virtual environments (Aarseth 1997). The last theory used in electronic literature is Multimodality and Media Integration theory. This theory suggests that electronic literature often incorporates multimedia formats like images, texts, sound and videos. This

gives storytelling a dynamic nature which engages sensations like sight and sound allowing readers to engage with literature even more.

Scholars efforts of theorising electronic literature has also culminated in the establishment of The Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) in 1999 which, up-to-date, organizes yearly conferences, and publishes book series, journals which offer an overview of the most important academic works of literature. According to (Pablo & Goicoechea 2014), The ELO alongside comparable organizations, such as ELMCIP, NT2, Literatura Electrónica Hispánica, and CELL has played a decisive role in the recognition of electronic literature as an art form.

Leonardo Flores (2019) argues that a “third generation” of electronic literature has been introduced. This generation is characterized by the use of social media such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. These platforms offer new possibilities for the production and consumption of electronic literature as hardly any technical skills are needed to create and disseminate these works. Flores continues that third generation literature concerns works that are made “by and for contemporary audiences for whom digital media has become naturalized” (Flores 2019). As such, electronic literature is “collaborative, as users repurpose and reimagine other people’s work” (Cramer 2014, p 11). Consequently, this generation jeopardises the complicated and philosophical nature of literature. Literature thus becomes produced by literally anyone, or what Flores called “contemporary audiences”. This criterion diminishes the didactic, socio-political and cultural values of traditional literature. Therefore, literature moves away from being a rigorous, academic field of knowledge through which metaphysical, supernatural, ontological and philosophical questions are understood and answered.

4. Implications of Electronic Literature and Avenues for Future Research

Electronic literature relies on digital platforms which creates a challenge in terms of preserving and archiving it. The obsolescence of hardware and software risks the longevity of electronic literature. Thus, further research about safer methods of archiving electronic literature is needed. Problems of distribution and access are also major concerns. Historically, most research on electronic literature has focused on works from the United States, Canada, and Europe. However, this focus has slightly shifted to other parts of the world. Studies have been published on electronic literature in Latin America, for instance, such as Claire Taylor’s *Electronic Literature in Latin America* (2019), and *Technology, Literature, and Digital Culture in Latin America: Mediatized Sensibilities in a Globalized Era* (2016) by Matthew Bush and Tania Gentic. In the Arab world, the Jordanian writer Mohammed Sanagla is accredited for pioneering the field of electronic literature with four digital literary works: *El Dhil El Wahed* (The Only Shadow) 2001, *Shatat* (Scattered Pieces) 2005, *Saq’ii* (Ice) 2007, and *Dhilalou el ashqi* (A Lover’s Shadows) 2016. Giovanna di Rosario, Nohelia Meza, and Kerri Grimaldi (2021) provide a historical overview of the most important developments in Europe, North America, Latin America, and the Arab World respectively. They state that more research is required about electronic literature from Asia in particular and point out global perspectives on the socio-cultural implications of electronic literature. They contend that while electronic literature allow marginalised people to voice their concerns to a wider audience, digital access creates challenges for global participation.

6. Conclusion

Electronic literature continues to evolve and shift as technological advancements are made. This provides electronic literature with a dynamic aspect which allows more room for experimentation with different literary modes of narratives and a mass expansion of expression. In this sense, literature becomes more accessible and engaging. However, electronic literature seems to jeopardise the complicated and philosophical nature of literature. Literature thus becomes produced by literally anyone, something which diminishes the didactic, socio-political and cultural values of traditional literature. Therefore, literature moves away from being a rigorous, academic field of knowledge through which metaphysical, supernatural, ontological and philosophical questions are understood and answered. Consequently, ethical concerns regarding the integrity and reliability of electronic literature should be questioned and addressed.

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