

# Introduction: Electronic Literature as a Framework for the Digital Humanities

electronicbookreview.com/essay/electronic-literature-frameworks-for-the-creative-digital-humanities

July 1, 2020

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08-02-2020

thread: electropoetics  
<https://doi.org/10.7273/vyqe-dq93>  
This essay was peer-reviewed.  
electropoetics



## **Included in the Gathering:** Electronic Literature [Frame]works for the Creative Digital Humanities

Rettberg and Saum introduce a collection of essays, presented at the Summer 2019 [Frame]works conference at the University of California, Berkeley, that bring literary criticism and creativity (equally) to bear on the digital humanities.

While electronic literature and the digital humanities have always been intimately intertwined, until recently they have been primarily addressed as distinctive fields. Electronic Literature has evolved as a specific field dedicated to born-digital literary forms, emergent from and responsive to computational technology and the networked environment. As self-reflexive literary artifacts and practices, works of electronic literature provide us with tutor texts for understanding changes taking place in the nature of human communications and society as nearly all aspects of culture have become digitally mediated. Less specific in nature has been the now established field of digital humanities, which began as “humanities computing” with a focus on applying digital tools and methods to traditional areas of humanities research, such as literature, history, information studies and archeology, and in recent years has broadened to include in its scope humanistic approaches to contemporary digital culture in an era of “big tent” digital humanities. Although the DH field has been widely opposed to rigid definitions or delimitations in its scope, the academic practice in its many institutionalized forms has created an unorthodox practical definition that acknowledges certain practices as “more DH” than others. There is a lingering perception that DH is most interested in exploring the past through different digital methods and tools, while e-lit is looking forward into the future, focusing on new forms of literature in digital media. The gathering of articles that we are initiating here will unfold over the course of the coming year. Our aim is to satisfy significant lacks both in the corpus of work specifically addressing electronic literature and digital humanities at large.

Taking this to heart, the approach to putting this project together is itself distinctive in that it enacts established networked practices of digital humanities projects to the study of electronic literature and vice versa. Born out of an international collaboration between the University of Bergen and University of California, Berkeley funded by the Peder Sather Center for Advanced Study, both the genesis and the practical aspects of writing and curating this gathering are embedded within a collaborative digital humanities framework that has included in-person group workshops in different parts of California and Norway and digital exchanges. The project is the product of a research network built both upon research affinities developed online and interpersonal interaction. Our goal in putting this project together was to explore electronic literature as a *creative* field of digital humanities: by this we mean not only that the field is built upon innovative and experimental literary practice. Electronic literature has also generated its own apparatus outside of pre-existing academic disciplinary divisions. Research and practice go hand and hand in this field. During the workshops through which we developed this project in Bergen, Berkeley, and Santa Barbara, we mixed critical and theoretical presentations with readings and performances of creative works that enacted the concepts that the critical work reflected. The articles in this gathering will also demonstrate the ethos of co-creation of critical discourse and poesis upon which the field of electronic literature is fundamentally based.

By seeking breadth as well as depth, the articles gathered here not only provide a focused examination of one particular area of DH, namely, e-lit, but also offer a panoramic view of the infrastructures, collaborative practices, and methodologies that have established the field internationally. Offering a deep dive into a broad digital humanities field, rather than treating just a single project or dimension, “Electronic Literature [Frame]works for the Creative Digital Humanities” provides a unique example of how the assemblage of a DH field takes form and operates. By this, we not only mean to incorporate electronic literature as an academic subdiscipline of the digital humanities, nor do we understand it merely as a possible object of DH analysis. What we propose is to consider electronic literature as a combination of the practices and methodologies that come about through its production, its study and its dissemination--not only the final creative works it produces--and explore how these disrupt, decenter and complement the DH field. Creativity is central and found at all levels and spheres of electronic literature, but as the articles in this gathering show, there is a need to redeploy creative practice critically to address the increasing instrumentalization of the digital humanities.

Thus, taking electronic literature as a method for the digital humanities, while being attentive to what established DH research methods and infrastructures have to offer in return to the e-lit field currently, the articles in this gathering do not simply focus on the present circumstance, but take a longitudinal perspective that extends both into the past and towards the future--looking, also, vertically to both hemispheres of the world and both sides of the Atlantic: Europe, North and South America. Comprehensively, “Electronic Literature [Frame]works for the Creative Digital Humanities” offers a practical and prescriptive way of understanding what Creative Digital Humanities may look like, and what this means for pedagogy, research, the arts, and academic administration in the Humanities writ large.

The field (or interzone) of digital humanities has generated a great deal of scholarship during the past 15 years, including a number of compilations, such as Blackwell's *A Companion to Digital Humanities* (2004) and *A New Companion to Digital Humanities* (2016) and the three volumes of *Debates in the Digital Humanities* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012, 2016, and 2019). These large collections of short contributions by large groups of researchers have attempted alternately to provide a comprehensive vision of DH as a broad field of diverse practices through specialized summations of subfields, or to characterize theoretical debates in DH, including the epistemology and ontology of DH and its place within contemporary academia. Important monographs such as *Digital Humanities* by Burdick, Drucker, Lunenfeld, (The MIT Press, 2012) and *Digital Humanities: Knowledge and Critique in a Digital Age* (Polity, 2017) by David Berry and Anders Fagerjord have also played a crucial role in defining practice-based approaches to DH and defining computational thinking methods applicable to traditional humanities problems. *Digital Humanities* in particular has close connections to our method in putting this issue together, because that collection builds upon specific case examples of DH projects in order to make more generalizable claims.

Although the scholarship on DH is quite extensive, and there are many DH projects coming out of English literature programs and departments in the USA, not much research has been published dealing with the intersection of digital humanities and literature exclusively. Some exceptions include Johanna Drucker's *SpecLab: Digital Aesthetics and Projects in Speculative Computing* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), which explored the implications of mixing graphic arts and literature, while commenting on the formation of DH infrastructural laboratories like the University of Virginia's *SpecLab*. Moving beyond a concrete case study and, despite not making a direct link to DH infrastructure, Jessica Pressman and N. Katherine Hayles's edited collection, *Comparative Textual Media* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), advocates looking at print media alongside digital literature and video games, focusing on potential institutional transformations. Besides monographs and edited collections, *Digital Humanities Quarterly* devoted a special issue 7.1 (2017) to exploring the topic of "The Literary" (edited by Jessica Pressman and Lisa Swanstrom), and although some articles addressed the relation of the literary to digital literature, the link between the fields of DH and e-lit still needs to be made.

At the same time, a series of recent books devoted exclusively to electronic literature have now been published. Scott Rettberg's recent monograph, *Electronic Literature* (Polity, 2019) offers an extensive overview of different genres in the field, while placing them within their historical, cultural and technological contexts. Two recent edited volumes, Scott Rettberg, Patricia Tomaszek, and Sandy Baldwin's *Electronic Literature Communities* (Center for Literature Computing and ELMCIP, 2015) and Joseph Tabbi's *Bloomsbury Handbook of Electronic Literature* (Bloomsbury, 2018) bring together theories and contemporary literature practices and debates around this dynamic field. *Traversals: The Use of Preservation for Early Electronic Writing* (The MIT Press, 2017) by Dene Grigar and Stuart Moulthrop describes the results of one excellent digital humanities documentation and preservation project. Mark Marino's *Critical Code Studies* (The MIT Press, 2020) proposes a humanities-driven research method of analyzing code

of particular relevance to electronic literature. Perhaps with the exception of the forthcoming volume *Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities: Contexts, Forms and Practices* (Bloomsbury, 2020) edited by Dene Grigar and James O’Sullivan, none of these publications extensively place electronic literature among DH debates or practice. Here we do so in a free online open access forum that takes advantage of the multimedial affordances and discursive environment of the Web. With a clear and focused field orientation, the *ebr* article gathering format allows us not only to fill that research gap, but also to make visible the research networks we have in place as we figure out how these are being reshaped by the intersection of the two fields.

The contributions in “Electronic Literature Frame[works] for the Creative Digital Humanities,” both by electronic literature pioneers who helped to establish the field (Coover, Kozak, Marino, Memmott, Rettberg, Pressman, Tabbi, Wardrip-Fruin, and Walker Rettberg) and by mid and early career researchers who are blazing new trails (Ackermans, Anderson, Berner, Douglass, Ikeda, Karhio, Muzzall, Saum, Seica, Von Vacano, and Zamora), demonstrate how specific digital humanities methods and practices establish platforms upon which new research communities, research methods, and pedagogies can be built. While all the researchers involved work with electronic literature, they are based in a variety of fields including English and Spanish Literature, Digital Culture, Education, Games Studies, and Computer Science.

Although this gathering is conceived as an ongoing conversation, as we roll out 2-3 articles every month during the remainder of 2020 and beginning of 2021, all contributions are tackling at least one of the three following areas: Building Research Infrastructures and Environments, Exploring Creative Research Practice, and Proposing Critical Reading Methodologies. These are not conceived as closed areas, but porous and connected zones from which to approach diverse problems and questions. We offer here a tentative menu of what we have planned for the coming months as this thread unfolds, while keeping in mind that some of the contributions may morph as we proceed, and that we welcome new additions and ripostes. One reason we are publishing this work on *electronic book review*, rather than as a book with a commercial publisher, is that *ebr* has always been an environment in which critical discourse and debate is free, open-access, fluid, and responsive. The recent publication of the two-volume *Post-Digital: Dialogues and Debates from electronic book review* (Bloomsbury, 2020) provides a concretized record of how many of those debates over the past two decades shaped the field of electronic literature (among them, notably: *critical ecologies*, *electropoetics*, and *critical code studies*). Just as the threads of essays in those volumes grew in a generative and responsive manner, we hope that this budding thread will grow new branches as it unfurls. Here is what we have planned:

## **Building Research Infrastructures and Environments:**

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Hannah Ackermans (University of Bergen) begins this investigation by addressing the need, possibilities and limitations of building digital research infrastructures for electronic literature. She advances her notion of database criticism to provide a critical apparatus to approach databases in aesthetic and qualitative terms. Looking at a

particular example of an electronic literature database, Scott Rettberg (University of Bergen) develops a conceptual model for a field, tracking how relations between different types of objects provide a framework visible and pliable to researchers in “Documenting a Field: The Life and Afterlife of the ELMCIP Collaborative Research Project and Electronic Literature Knowledge Base.” Going further, Joseph Tabbi (University of Bergen) explores the potential of community built scholarly databases that emerge in contrast to uncritical data gathering repositories, only meant to track views, citations and downloads. In “Something there badly not wrong: The Life and Death of Literary Form in Databases,” Tabbi describes the close reading of databases as a literary digital practice that has the potential of bringing DH scholars in closer contact to one another. Looking at the state of DH at another campus of the University of California, Adam Anderson, Evan Muzzall and Claudia von Vacano present what it means to nurture a STEAM (Science and Technology, interpreted through Engineering and the Arts) mindset in higher education for DH and electronic literature at Berkeley.

## **Exploring Creative Research Practice:**

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Moving from infrastructures to explore the potential of creative research practice, Alex Saum-Pascual (UC Berkeley) opens the next area of inquiry with “Digital Creativity as Critical Material Thinking: The Disruptive Potential of Electronic Literature.” She proposes a new conceptual framework for the study and practice of DH based on the concept of “critical creativity,” as an integral competence to “critical thinking.” She explores the materiality of electronic literature to propose a type of creative material discourse that, by resembling posthuman takes on humanism discourses, tries to overcome the stagnation of traditional humanities discourses and approaches. Also searching for alternative models of interpretation to address humanistic inquiry, Noah Wardrip-Fruin (UC Santa Cruz) reflects on how digital humanities approaches have guided the computational work done at his Expressive Intelligence Studio at UC Santa Cruz. At the Studio, co-directed with Michael Mateas, they develop works of electronic literature that are pursued both as new aesthetic works and as driving applications for technology research. Scott Rettberg and Roderick Coover (Temple University) tackle further the relation between technological research and the humanities and argue that critical digital media projects, “driven by scientific research, non-fiction documentary evidence and digital media aesthetics can have just as significant impacts in helping society to grapple with some of the most significant challenges of our time as can research driven by more traditional disciplinary approaches” (Coover, Rettberg).

## **Proposing Critical Reading Methodologies:**

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These articles investigate the application of new hybrid research methods that straddle the arts, media, and scientific practice. In “Collaborative Reading Praxis,” Jeremy Douglass, Mark Marino (University of Southern California) and Jessica Pressman (San Diego State University) offer a model of literary interpretation that combines software and traditional literary methods through recreative and recursive collaboration. They argue that changes in our digital texts require changes to our reading practices and they demonstrate how to apply a new DH methodology to read works of electronic literature.

Álvaro Seiça (UC Los Angeles/ University of Bergen) provides a concrete example of these types of applied DH methodologies in “Lit Mods.” He presents a critical framework about modifications of source code of literary works--which he calls “lit mods”--as a way of reading and analyzing kinetic digital text. Rather than looking down at the code, in her contribution Jill Walker Rettberg (University of Bergen) applies a science fiction speculative approach to electronic literature and locates new relationships to technology in digital interfaces. Similarly addressing our relationship with technological development, Justin Berner’s (UC Berkeley) “Unhelpful Tools: Reexamining The Digital Humanities through Eugenio Tisselli’s *degenerative* and *regenerative*” proposes that electronic literature can provide a reflection on industrialism in the digital age (and its prevalence in DH) by an aesthetic mode that “inherently and explicitly marries the use of digital technologies with a critique of those technologies in its meditation on the digital text” (Berner). Berner’s article presents an example of how the humanities can approach a future that increasingly incorporates more and more non-human actors. In “Ethics and Aesthetics of (Digital) Space: National Institutions and Transnational Frameworks of Irish Electronic Literature,” Anne Karhio (National University of Ireland, Galway) takes Berner’s question further by examining how emerging forms of literary and artistic digital art are adopted as means to critique phenomena that, while transcending national and geographical borders, are experienced in specific social, cultural and political circumstances and locations. She studies the concrete case of Ireland as a paradigmatic example of the most problematic national endorsement of the digital humanities, digital media and the global multinational economy (growing social inequality, the refugee crisis, and the political tensions troubling the nation state’s borders) and much like Rettberg and Coover defends the potential of electronic literature as critical media. At the other side of the Atlantic but in a similar vein, Claudia Kozak (University of Buenos Aires) reads Latin American electronic literature as a unique political resource for building critical paths within global digital humanities. From the perspective of the epistemologies of the South (Santos) she decenters current DH debates in the US and Europe to consider them as political domains that involve struggles concerning geopolitical, economic and linguistic hegemonies as well as technical ones. Continuing the investigation on e-lit and DH’s politics, this time in the USA, Ryan Ikeda excavates what he describes as the entrenched logics of white supremacy within the fields’ infrastructures and practices. Rather than thinking about white supremacy as a personal indictment, he defines it as the “underlying structural conditions that position subjects into hierarchies and then proceed in perpetuity to affirm such manufactured differences as natural, normal or acceptable” (Ikeda 2021). Applying this definition to a series of important e-lit projects, he proposes antiracism as a way of performing infrastructural critique.

As these contributions will demonstrate, electronic literature, by building these frameworks from the ground up, is a paradigmatic example of the contemporary digital humanities. This example further lends itself to extrapolation by other emergent fields of digital humanities research, thus we hope that this *ebr* gathering is not read as being so much about the field of electronic literature in isolation as it is about building newly networked fields of research in the humanities.

## Planned publication schedule

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“Electronic Literature [Frame]works for the Creative Digital Humanities” by Scott Rettberg and Alex Saum - August 2020

### ***Building Research Infrastructures and Environments***

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“Appealing to your better judgment: A Call for Database Criticism” By Hannah Ackermans - August 2020

“Something there badly not wrong: The Life and Death of Literary Form in Databases” by Joseph Tabbi - August 2020

“Building STEAM for DH and Electronic Literature: An Educational Approach to Nurturing the STEAM Mindset in Higher Education” by Claudia von Vacano et al. - October 2020

“Documenting a Field: The Life and Afterlife of the ELMCIP Collaborative Research Project and Electronic Literature Knowledge Base” by Scott Rettberg - January 2021

### ***Exploring Creative Research Practice***

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“Digital Creativity as Critical Material Thinking: The Disruptive Potential of Electronic Literature” by Alex Saum - August 2020

“Addressing Significant Societal Challenges Through Critical Digital Media” by Scott Rettberg and Roderick Coover - August 2020

“When Error Rates Fail: Digital Humanities Concepts as a Guide for Electronic Literature Research” by Noah Wardrip-Fruin - December 2020

### ***Proposing Critical Reading Methodologies***

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“Collaborative Reading Praxis” by Jeremy Douglass, Mark Marino and Jessica Pressman - September 2020

“Lit Mods” by Álvaro Seiça - September 2020

“Unhelpful Tools: Reexamining The Digital Humanities through Eugenio Tisselli’s *degenerative* and *regenerative*” by Justin Berner - September 2020

“Ethics and Aesthetics of (Digital) Space: Institutions, Borders, and Transnational Frameworks of Digital Creative Practice in Ireland” by Anne Karhio - October 2020

“Experimental Electronic Literature from the Souths. A Political Contribution to Critical and Creative Digital Humanities” by Claudia Kozak - October 2020

“Speculative Interfaces: How Electronic Literature Uses Interface to Make Us Think About Technology” by Jill Walker Rettberg - February 2021

"Excavating Logics of White Supremacy in Electronic Literature: Antiracism as Infrastructural Critique" by Ryan Ikeda - December 2020

"Practice, Practice, Practice: Digital Media Labs as Locations for Information" by Talan Memmott - December 2020

### **Cite this Essay:**

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Rettberg, Scott and Alex Saum. "Introduction: Electronic Literature as a Framework for the Digital Humanities", *Electronic Book Review*, August 2, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.7273/vyqe-dq93>.

Readers wishing to respond to an essay in *ebr* may send ripostes or short glosses to the journal's Managing Editor, [Will Luers](#).

This essay was peer-reviewed.

[Digital Creativity as Critical Material Thinking: The Disruptive Potential of Electronic Literature Is Third Generation Literature Postweb Literature? And Why Should We Care?](#)

[A Digital Publishing Model for Publication by Writers \(for Writers\)](#)

[Addressing Significant Societal Challenges Through Critical Digital Media](#)

[Always Inside, Always Enfolded into the Metainterface: A Roundtable Discussion](#)

[An Emerging Canon? A Preliminary Analysis of All References to Creative Works in Critical Writing Documented in the ELMCIP Electronic Literature Knowledge Base](#)

[At a Heightened Level of Intensity: A Discussion of the Philosophy and Politics of Language in John Cayley's Digital Poetics](#)

other essays in

[Electronic Literature \[Frame\]works for the Creative Digital Humanities](#)

[Introduction: Electronic Literature as a Framework for the Digital Humanities](#)

by Scott Rettberg, Alex Saum-Pascual

[Excavating Logics of White Supremacy in Electronic Literature: Antiracism as Infrastructural Critique](#)

by Ryan Ikeda

[Digital Creativity as Critical Material Thinking: The Disruptive Potential of Electronic Literature](#)

by Alex Saum-Pascual

[Something there badly not wrong: the life and death of literary form in databases](#)

by Joseph Tabbi

[Documenting a Field: The Life and Afterlife of the ELMCIP Collaborative Research Project and Electronic Literature Knowledge Base](#)

by Scott Rettberg

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[Descending into the Archives: An Interview with Hypertext Author Bill Bly](#)

by Brian Davis, Bill Bly

[Literary Texts as Cognitive Assemblages: The Case of Electronic Literature](#)

by Katherine Hayles

[Literature and its digital and computational others](#)

by John Cayley

[Room for So Much World: A Conversation with Shelley Jackson](#)

by Scott Rettberg, Shelley Jackson

