

# Electronic Literature in 2016: Definitions, Trends, Preservation, and Projections

written by Guest Contributor | February 1, 2016



Pronouncing poetry dead has become so common, it's basically a literary tradition at this point. Somewhere this very moment, a tired thinkpiece writer is proudly typing the eulogy, eager to note the exact moment in time when poetry ceased to be a relevant medium in the grand scheme of our culture.

It's impossible to say when exactly poetry took its final gasps, though this hasn't stopped people from trying. It could have been 1992, when Dana Gioia—the future head of the National Endowment of the Arts—wrote in an [essay](#) that poetry is “no longer part of the mainstream of artistic and intellectual life.” Maybe it was a decade later, when the staff of Newsweek penned a widely read column entitled [“Poetry is Dead. Does Anyone Really Care?”](#) Perhaps it was as recent as 2013, when [an op-ed](#) in the Washington Post compared poetry to the Postal Service—“a group of people sedulously doing something that we no longer need, under the misapprehension that they are offering us a vital service.”

Maybe more interesting is the speculation of what killed poetry. Jonathan Franzen, part-time novelist and full-time curmudgeon, is pretty sure the Internet is responsible, placing blame for the unenlightened Modern World on our “media-saturated, technology-crazed, apocalypse-haunted historical moment.” Meanwhile, according to the above mentioned Washington Post editorial, poetry is dead by stagnation, as “There is no longer, really, any formal innovation possible.”

Hold the iPhone. We're living in this digitally-crazed historical moment so disruptive to the old-guard Franzens of the world as to signal Armageddon.

AND, simultaneously, poetry—a form of creative expression that has constantly evolved since the Epic of Gilgamesh was published in 2100 BC—is just now experiencing a fatal failure to innovate. How is this possible?

Well, it's not. In fact, a compelling body of evidence suggests that, thanks to rapidly accelerating technology, the world of poetry is entering a golden age of sorts, ripe with innovations that we can't yet fully understand. In the ashes of digital disruption, a contemporary literary movement is taking shape, and it's found a way to take advantage of the new ways people are both consuming and producing information. It's called electronic poetry (sometimes digital poetry)—a form of electronic literature (sometimes digital literature)—and it may very well change everything we thought we knew about poetry.

To get a better idea of what all this means, I spoke with Leonardo Flores, creator and publisher of the scholarly blogging project I ♥ E-Poetry. His thoughtful and well-sourced answers should provide a useful primer of how electronic poetry came to be and where it is heading in 2016.

**Jake Offenhartz:** First off, it seems that the vocabulary and set of definitions concerning electronic literature is still in the process of being written. For the uninitiated, how would you define electronic literature?

**Leonardo Flores:** The most common misconception among the uninitiated is to equate e-lit to e-books. Nothing is further from the truth. E-books are a way to represent print books in digital media. E-lit is a creative exploration of the word in digital media.

Several authoritative definitions of electronic literature have been formulated over the years but they are periodically revisited and revised as the field changes and grows. The Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) formulated and published an excellent definition in January 2007.

Electronic literature, or e-lit, refers to **works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer**" ([What is E-Lit?](#)).

This definition has served the field well, but genres change at an accelerated pace in the digital world. When this definition was formulated, social networks were only starting to gain in popularity, the iPhone hadn't been launched (not to mention iPads or Android touchscreen devices), netbooks (remember those?) were just being introduced to the market, Flash reigned supreme as multimedia authoring software, and cloud computing was on the forecast. The definition still works, but we need to change it or expand our understanding of "computer" to include smartphones, smart TVs, smart watches, (notice the naming trend?), wearable devices (such as Google Glass, Oculus Rift, Microsoft HoloLens), the Internet of Things (IoT), and other yet unforeseen technologies. The list of genres offered in the definition also needs to be updated to include bots, kinetic typography, image macro and animated GIF memes, Twine games, and other emergent genres.

We also need to account for the ubiquity of computing and digital media. In

the early days of the field, the distinction between print and digital writing was a convenient and rhetorically powerful trope. But now that most contemporary writing is already “born digital” (though designed for print-based interfaces) its digitality has lost power as an indicator. This raises a few questions: how much of an engagement with digital and electronic media is enough for something to be considered e-lit? And what distinguishes e-literature from computationally intensive works such as videogames? How e-literary is a work of e-lit?

Electronic literature comes in many shapes and sizes: and its traditions and communities of practice are as diverse as there are technologies. As electronic literature communities emerge around the world they bring with them their own particular engagements with digital media. For example, N. Katherine Hayles’ periodization of electronic literature into two generations— early text-based works up to 1995 and a more multimedia intensive contemporary period after that year— is centered on the U.S., Canada, England, and Australia in its perspective. As we now know, this kind of period boundary doesn’t work well for countries like Poland which has a rich demo scene tradition, Arabic e-literature that is still based heavily on multimedia compositions on the virtual and printable page, and Latin American e-literature is rich with videopoetry and multimedia performances.

There are ongoing attempts to update the definition of e-literature. Scott Rettberg’s entry on “Electronic Literature” in [The Johns Hopkins Guide to Digital Media](#) (2014) does a great job of unpacking the ELO’s 2007 definition and expanding upon it. More recently, the ELC3 Editorial Collective— a team of 4 scholars (myself included) recently tasked with the creation of the [Electronic Literature Collection, Volume 3](#)— has been working with a definition, provisionally recasting it along these simplified lines:

Electronic literature (or e-lit) thrives at the intersection of digital media and textuality.

Whatever definitions we settle on, it’s exciting to study an emergent literary form that is constantly evolving beyond established definitions.

**J0: As editor and writer of the I ♥ E-Poetry blogging project, you’ve spent over four years personally reviewing over 550 works of electronic literature. Have you noticed any shifts in the genre during that time? Would you say that people are interacting with digital poetry today in ways that they weren’t when this project was originally conceived?**

**LF:** There have been several technological significant shifts in the past four years that have had an impact on electronic literature. The development of faster wireless data helped shift storage and computation to the cloud. Social media networks developed into platforms for the development of apps, games, and bots. Touchscreen and mobile devices, such as tablets and smartphones became important platforms and marketplaces for digital works. Motion sensing software, wearable devices, and VR devices are developing into desirable development platforms. Browsers have matured to become extensible platforms for the development of Web apps, plugins, add-ons. And to stop somewhere, Flash has been replaced by HTML5, JavaScript, and other authoring

systems. All of these technological shifts are starting to affect the new e-lit being written in direct and subtle ways.

Here are a few examples.

- Bots, an e-lit genre that started in 1966 with Joseph Weizenbaum's chatterbot [ELIZA](#), has grown and [diversified enormously](#) in Twitter and other social networks, led by bot maker [Darius Kazemi](#) and several thriving communities, such as the [#botALLY](#) and [#Botmakers](#). Mainstream media outlets are covering news on bots, to the extent that a recent publication, [BotWatch](#), emerged to aggregate news and commission articles on bots. Bots are perhaps the fastest growing e-lit genre at this time.



Some of the generated output by "[Magic Realism Bot](#)" by Chris and Ali Rodley

- Interactive Fiction (IF) and [hypertext fiction](#), both of which saw their heyday in the 1980s and 1990s, find their legacy continued in platforms like [Twine](#), which lends itself for the authoring of both hypertext narratives and games.
- We are seeing increasingly high quality work developed for iOS and Android touchscreen devices, such as Jason Edward Lewis' [PoEMM](#) series, Jörg Piringer's [Lettrist apps](#), Jody Zellen's [artistic apps](#), Samantha Gorman and Danny Cannizzaro's award-winning iOS novella [Pry](#), and the Kickstarter funded game-novel by Aaron Reed and Jacob Garbe [Ice-Bound: A Novel of Reconfiguration](#).



“chromosome one,” *Tiny*

Poems by Jörg Piringer

- Writers like [Jim Andrews](#), [Andy Campbell](#), [Christine Wilks](#), [María Mencía](#) and [Alan Bigelow](#), who developed their oeuvre in Director and Flash in the first decade of the 2000s are now shifting to CSS, HTML5, JavaScript, Processing, Unity, and other development environments to produce work that extends their poetics into new platforms and new forms.



Still from “Transient Self Portrait” by María Mencía

- New collaborative teams produce works that have hybrid existences in digital media and physical spaces, such as [Zuzana Husárová and Lubomir Panák](#), Natalia Fedorova and Taras Mashtalir (aka [Machine Libertine](#)), [Amaranth Borsuk](#) who collaborated with Brad Bouse to create [Between Page and Screen](#) and continues to collaboratively create works that place e-lit in conversation with [artists’ books](#).

Even publishers are starting to realize the potential e-literature has, as can be seen in the explosion of interactive [children’s e-literature](#) for touchscreen devices, as well as the production of [multimedia](#) and [critical editions](#) of classic literary works— productions that Bárbara Bordalejo has aptly labeled “[born-again digital](#).”



Figure 2: *iPoe Collection* by Play Creatividad

The most important shift I have noticed has come from audiences, who seem to be waking up from the [e-book](#) spell cast on them by the publishing industry (perhaps necessarily) to discover the possibilities of digital media. One indicator is the recent explosion of [transmedia storytelling](#), an old idea that has become increasingly popular and participatory with the rise of social networks. People are participating massively in online gaming, writing fan fiction and creating communities to share their born-digital creations online.



They may not even be aware that they are producing something that could be considered electronic literature, or that there's an intellectual and artistic history to the work they're doing. We can see this with the massive creation and dissemination of [image macro memes](#) (which have comics as an antecedent) and [kinetic typography](#) videos (preceded by film and television [title sequences](#)).



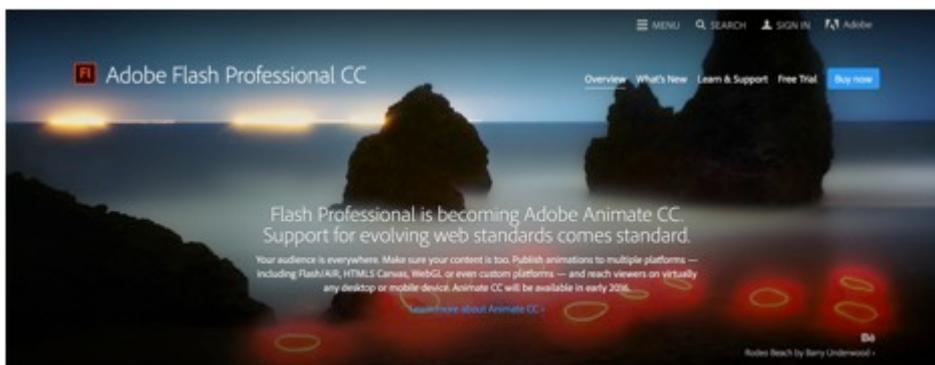
the [Matrix Morpheus meme](#)

My play on

The crucial thing is that people are increasingly creating, sharing, reading, and interacting with works that “thrive at the intersection of digital media and textuality.” And when they’re ready, they’ll learn about its history and traditions in [I ♥ E-Poetry](#) and [other scholarly resources](#).

**JO:** In your role as Fulbright Scholar of Digital Culture, you’ve done a lot of work in preserving first generation electronic literature projects. Can you talk about a little bit about the challenges in preserving digital works in the face of our rapidly accelerating world of technology?

**LF:** This is a huge issue in our field because works are created in and for a specific computational environment—platforms, hardware, operating systems, software, plugins, fonts, etc.—and these change constantly. Future versions of software and operating systems tend to offer 5-10 years of backwards compatibility and then you need to upgrade or lose works created for older versions, as was the case with Adobe Director (read [this interview](#) for an example) and may soon be the case with Flash. Sometimes software is discontinued entirely, as was the case with [Apple HyperCard](#), and works developed for it are either [ported](#) to another system or rendered obsolete.



Screenshot of Adobe Flash Web page (taken January 6, 2016)

There are several strategies we can use for preservation of born-digital works:

- **Collecting, Publishing, Curating, Exhibiting, Teaching, and Studying** works of electronic literature are the first line of defense towards preservation. Circulating and getting people to experience and think about e-lit gives it cultural value. And cultures prioritize the preservation of works that matter to them. Even if the works disappear or become inoperable, we can remember they existed.
- **Documenting** works goes a step further by describing, taking screenshots, and/or recording video playthroughs to get a sense of how they worked, as we can see in the [Pathfinders Project](#). The projects affiliated with the [Consortium of Electronic Literature](#) (CELL), all do important work of describing, categorizing, and critically appraising e-lit works.
- **Archiving** published works and their source files, so that future generations can access the files, even if obsolete. [The Electronic Literature Collections](#), [EX](#), the [Internet Archive](#) in conjunction with the [Electronic Literature Organization](#), as well as some university libraries have created repositories, but there is much more work to be done in this area.
- **Collecting hardware, operating systems, and software** is another strategy because it preserves the physical and computational context for the works. Centers like the [Media Archaeology Lab](#) (MAL), [The Trope Tank](#), [MITH](#), the [Electronic Literature Lab](#) (ELL) lovingly preserve and extend the life of vintage computer hardware and the works that run in them.
- **Porting** works to contemporary computational environments is a good short-term strategy, but requires future upgrades as these technologies change. An exemplary porting and archiving job was done in 2004 with bpNichol's 1984 Applesoft Basic e-poem [First Screening](#).
- **Emulation or Virtualization** of computational environments so that old works can run in the contexts and dependencies they were designed for is a newer approach that has great promise, as can be seen in projects like the [Internet Arcade](#).

The big issue isn't just the preservation of digital literature. It's the preservation of digital EVERYTHING. The more we rely upon digital technology for interaction, knowledge production, creativity, communication, leisure, and running our world the more urgent digital preservation becomes. For a more comprehensive coverage of this subject visit the Library of Congress resource [digitalpreservation.gov](http://digitalpreservation.gov).

**J0:** Finally, how do you see the role of electronic literature—specifically electronic poetry—evolving in the future? Is electronic poetry a genre that stands separate from traditional poetry, or do you imagine a merging of the two, so that what we now consider to be experimental digital work will one day be conceptualized as the norm?

**LF:** It's hard to tell, precisely. Some scholars feel that electronic literature will become normalized and we'll eventually be able to drop the "electronic" qualifier so that it's just literature. I agree and like this

trajectory. Digital writing is here to stay and that includes writing words that move, that respond to input, that recombine, have generative aspects, or behave as programmed. We are already starting to shake off the rhetoric of linearity that print media promoted. And digital environments are perfect for multimodal communication in which instead of communicating by producing signs in a single mode, writing, we communicate by producing what [Gunther Kress](#) calls a sign-complex in multiple modes. In other words, just as when we communicate in person we use speech, gestures, facial expression, proximity, and the world around us in digital environments we can use writing, images, video, sound, animation, games, links, touchscreen gestures, and other modes working together to express ideas.

But I can also imagine a [post-digital](#) literature emerging in the future— no: in the present, [as Florian Cramer has suggested](#). Post-digital literature eschews digital technologies to refocus attention on older technologies like the page, book, scroll, or human body. But like a hipster taking a typewriter to the park, this will be an ironic gesture born from nostalgia, and the resulting literature will inevitably be different from the literary present they'll be attempting to reconstruct.



We are already digital writers, and [have been for a while](#), even if we're unaware of it, just as our children and *their* children will be increasingly native to the possibilities of digital writing.

I think it's inevitable.

**J0:** Who are some of the genre's emerging poets and creators that we should keep an eye out for?

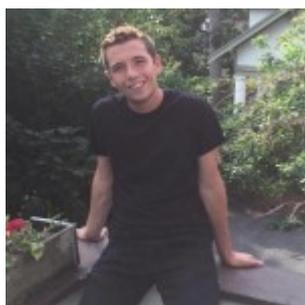
**LF:** I have partly answered this question in my discussion of the shift in electronic literature, but instead of elaborating now, and I could, how about I finish answering this question in about a year? I am currently working with Stephanie Boluk, Jacob Garbe, and Anastasia Salter in assembling the

[Electronic Literature Collection, Volume 3](#), which should be complete in February 2016. Our selection will be my response, though I'm sure by then we'll have discovered a whole new set of amazing writers and works of electronic literature.

In the meantime, go read [I ♥ E-Poetry](#) and subscribe to its feed. We have a talented team of contributors reading and writing about e-literary works that excite them. And the ♥ we feel for these works is bound to be contagious!

# I ♥ E-Poetry

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**Jake Offenhartz** is a staff writer at [HistoryBuff.com](#). Some of his better thoughts can be found on Twitter [@jangelooff](#).



**Leonardo Flores** is a Full Professor of [English at the University of Puerto Rico: Mayagüez Campus](#) and the Treasurer for the [Electronic Literature Organization](#). He was the 2012-2013 Fulbright Scholar in Digital Culture at the University of Bergen in Norway. His research areas are electronic literature (especially poetry), and its preservation via criticism, documentation, and digital archives. He is the creator and publisher of a scholarly blogging project titled *I ♥ E-Poetry* (<http://iloveepoetry.com>) and [a member of the Editorial Collective](#) for the *Electronic Literature Collection, Volume 3* (forthcoming February 2016). For more information on his current work visit <http://leonardoflores.net> or follow him on Twitter

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