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An Electronic Collection of Digital Literature

Electronic literature adds new dimensions to how the ideas of conventional literature are expressed. As a form of digital media, it has the ability to be dynamic, changing over time, and be completely interactive. This interactivity is realized as a dialogue between viewer and the work itself, making them an active participant who has an agency comparable to the artist himself. Similar to how concrete or shape poems convey an additional meaning through structure and form, the works in this collection function identically. Digital poetry however, is superior in that it has the capability to go one step further and convey even more meaning through its dynamics and reactiveness. Whereas conventional art can express many different ideas based on interpretation, digital art can achieve the same effect exponentially, communicating with audiences in modes unimaginable to artists prior to the dawn of the computer. It is in this dialogue that the *Electronic Literature Collection 2* completely invests itself. In the absence of direct expression, the viewer is forced to literally read in between the lines to discover the narrative being told and comprehend its overall idea.

My work was inspired by the digital collection of Hayles Strickland, a member of the Electronic Literature Organization, which compiled various forms of digital literature. Digital literature can be considered to describe a specific type of digital media that strives to convey a narrative through unconventional ways. It differs from conventional digital storytelling methods such as video or text, because its discrete parts are not obviously related. The difference between, a clip of a longer video and an element in an electronic literature work, is that the former is generally easier to identify as part of its parent movie. That being said this is only my understanding of the subjective distinction Strickland made when determining the entries for his collection. Even a movie or video game created for commercial reasons could be considered digital literature in much the same way as their printed counterparts. When one considers both this and a lack of defined theme for this collection, its inherent flaws become obvious. The collection lacks a focus and a lack of overall meaning, because its only parameters are works that the Electronic Literature Organization considered valid. Every work presented conveys a narrative idea, but each one of them is isolated from each other. The collection is essentially just a portal to view pieces that a curatorial organization dubbed “Electronic Literature”, easily substituted by a series of links. A digital version of a typical art museum, where the white non-descript walls are designed to direct audiences full attention to the pieces individual rather than the exhibit as a whole.

In the *Electronic Literature Collection 2*, I explore a different mentality. Strickland’s collection makes the mistake of implying what digital literature is by choosing what to exclude and include. This is akin to determine what is and is not electronic literature. This is an inevitability of any collection, but this problem is exacerbated by the lack of a theme. My solution to this is a predefined theme that dictates the constraints of every individual work in the collection and the added limitation that only works created solely for this purpose are included. For instance, it is reasonable to assume that Rob Wittig did not solely create *The Fall of the Site of Marsha* in 1999 to contribute to a collection that would occur 7 years later, but every piece in *Electronic Literature Collection 2* is entirely created with the purpose of supporting the main narrative of the whole collection. In this way, a single component becomes worthless as a standalone entity, an idea conveyed in how nothing in the collection is attributed to an artist. Even considering the fact that I created all of them, the distinction of author and description that the Strickland’s collection provides before every work would result in boundaries between them.

*Electronic Literature Collection 2* parodies Strickland’s *Electronic Literature Collection* by adopting its site layout, behavior, and its overall explicit purpose, of cataloging electronic literature. Even the URL is fairly similar. However, within a few seconds, the viewer quickly realizes key differences that portray that my collection is an entirely different beast. As opposed to the variety of thumbnails on a solid blue black drop in Strickland’s collection, successfully drawing the reader’s attention to those pieces, my collection is consists of entirely green and black, allowing the viewer’s eyes to wander. Whereas Strickland’s name is clearly presented next to the title of the collection at the bottom, the *Electronic Literature Collection 2* presents itself as completely anonymous or at least presented by an author with a name composed of gibberish. Finally, instead of the first collections impressive catalog of sixty literary works, my second collection features merely four randomly spread out and barely distinguishable from the blank tiles. No instruction is given, and like in Strickland’s collection, the viewer is prompted to explore viable highlighted thumbnails, but once clicked the similarities end there.

As opposed to the works in Strickland’s collection, there is no primer page that describes the work and gives instruction on how to use it correctly. Instead, viewers are simply thrown in, and must blindly fumble around to figure out how they can interact with the work. Every pieces is similar in that they all share a black background, emphasizing the prior point of fumbling around in the darkness until the viewer can get a reaction. Furthermore, none of the works have titles and can be viewed in any order, since they only affect the viewer’s interpretation of the whole rather than the individual parts. The works can also be completed, although quitting halfway through will have a similar effect, and will all display a link called “The End” that returns the viewer to the original homepage of the collection.

The viewer returns to find that the entire color scheme of the page has completely changed as a result of exploring one of the literary works. The changes mirror how the text displayed in each of the works changes based on interaction: the participant’s mouse movements, keystrokes, etc. In this case, the action of interacting with the collection itself changed it significantly. A far cry from the inert exhibit presented by the Electronic Literature Organization. However, it the overall narrative that I attempt to convey through the collection is only effectively understood once the viewer interacts with all four pieces of work and understand their relation to the main body.

The works presented in the *Electronic Literature Collection 2* fall into two categories: digital poetry and digital art. The digital poetry works are dynamic forms of concrete or shape poetry and have their form manipulated by the user. In these there is no intention behind the literal meaning of the words presented and their organization because these are entirely random. Instead the meaning is gleaned from the idea of the viewer creating meaning through a seemingly random process that they can influence. One of these works consists of a branching word tree grown every time the viewer lets go of an arrow key. The direction held down determines how the tree grows and depending on when they let go, the next word in the sequence is determined. This creates a sentence whose literal meaning is random but represents the viewer’s ability to craft meaning in and from the system. Only the viewer will even know what words they arrive at let alone what it means to them. After the tree has grown sufficiently long, the work begins to “malfunction”, exploding with words until the entire screen’s background is composed of them. In the other work, a similar idea is expressed, but instead of starting with a single word, the viewer is exposed to a mass of words, cleared away with a mouse swipe. Certain random words are highlighted, composing a scrambled famous quotation. However, with the anonymity presented and the lack of defined structure, the viewer can’t focus on the meaning of the quote, only understanding the overall idea that meaning is conveyed through interpretation.

The digital art pieces resemble a computer terminal and computer code respectively. In the terminal, the user is prompted to log in as a monkey of random ID. After typing a few keys, the participant realizes that it begins to auto type along with her. Specifically, the work begins to type *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, alluding to the infinite monkey theorem. This theorem posited that given an infinite time and infinite monkeys, one of these monkeys will happen to type *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* randomly because of the infinite number of possibilities that can occur. In this case, the viewer is thrust into the role of one of these monkeys, and by typing randomly achieves a similar feat. Lastly, the computer code work allows one to scroll through the code of an operating system, but as the participant does so, the work begins to auto scroll with random parts of it becoming red as it does so, signifying malicious code through the common idea of green being good and red being bad.

The viewer’s very own interaction is suggested to be under the volition of someone other than himself as every time the work reacts it seems to be ignoring the actions of the participant. Notice to that every time the user clicks on one of the displayed works, regardless of if he completes it or not, the home page changes from green, orange, blue, and finally red in its conclusion. On the very last page, *Electronic Literature Collection 2*, reveals its true nature, discarding the façade of being a collection by removing its four sub works, and displaying an aggressive face on a red backdrop. It becomes clear that the collection itself was a sentient being coercing and controlling the viewer to interact with it as it grows with every link click. After clicking the face, the sentience address the viewer directly announcing its arrival into a “new world”. The collection itself is electronic literature as opposed to just a collection of it.

References:

<http://collection-eliterature2.webuda.com/>

<http://eliterature.org/>

<http://collection.eliterature.org/1/>

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