



ELECTRONIC LITERATURE AS PART OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

La literatura digital en la Literatura Inglesa

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ABSTRACT

This essay introduces an approach to teach electronic literature in English Studies students; first introduces to the students what electronic literature is, that is, its main features, goals and genres. Secondly, it provides examples of women writers and their importance in the development of this kind of literature. Thirdly, it shows two electronic literary works written by women that may be part of the course's core readings. This article dives into and breaks apart these literary texts through an introduction and a close reading of them.

PALABRAS CLAVE

*Literatura electrónica
Literatura digital
E-poesía
Lectura
Mujer
Estudios Ingleses*

RESUMEN

El presente artículo presenta una propuesta para enseñar literatura digital a los estudiantes de Estudios ingleses. En ella primero se introduce qué es la literatura digital, sus principales características, objetivos y géneros. En segundo lugar, ofrece ejemplo de escritoras y su importancia en el desarrollo de esta escritura. En tercer lugar, se les muestra dos obras digitales escritas por mujeres que puede formar parte de las lecturas obligatorias del curso. Este trabajo ahonda en los dos ejemplos presentados mediante una introducción y una lectura detenida.

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1. Introduction

Typically in our conversations we talk about how difficult it is to encourage young people to read and to engage with literature, but while we are saying this, they are reading and playing on their smartphones or tablets. Maybe it is time to try a new kind of literature, one that is closer to their daily life, and which has a familiar interface for them: electronic literature. This literature, the avant-garde that gathers prose and poetry created and read in digital devices and cannot be read outside this tool, is studied in English and/or Digital Humanities departments especially in the USA, Canada and Norway. But in most of Spanish Universities digital literature – here synonymous with electronic literature– is only studied by researchers while most students have never heard of it. So, this new way of writing in the 21st century is not studied and even more, it is not used to try to engage our students.

This article proposes two main objectives. The first one is an approach to teach electronic literature in English studies to students as a way to include this type of literature into the English curriculum, the second, the importance of women writers in digital literature. This article offers a practical example of two or three sessions of an English Literature Introduction course, where two digital works written by women will be introduced and analysed.

To achieve this goal this essay first introduces to the students what electronic literature is, that is, its main features, goals and genres. Secondly, it provides examples of women writers and their importance in the development of this kind of literature. Thirdly it shows two electronic literary works written by women that may be part of the course's core readings. This article dives into and breaks apart these literary texts through an introduction and a close reading of them.

The essay's conclusions corroborate that electronic literature can be included in the English Studies curriculum and that it can be part of the English literature core readings. Furthermore, this literature that uses the new media can engage the students and orient them toward literature.

2. Objectives and learning outcomes

The course "Introduction to English and North American Literary Studies" is a mandatory subject which is taught in the second year of the English Studies degree at the University of Cadiz (Spain). At the moment, its core readings are print literature. And, with this essay, it is proposed to include a series of sessions about electronic literature that will help students to approach this avant-garde and to engage with literature and reading from works that could be more attractive to them towards the inclusion of this kind of literary work into the Degree Curriculum.

Two of the educational competencies of this course justify the inclusion of electronic literature in the curriculum. Moreover, they require us to go deeper into history, culture and literature. Furthermore, digital humanities and women are two concepts essential in English-speaking countries in the 21st century that need to be introduced in "Introduction to English and North American Literary Studies". The competencies referred to are the following:

- To know the history and culture of English-speaking countries.
- Knowledge of the literature of English-speaking countries.

To achieve the mentioned goals, it is necessary to establish specific objectives behind the inclusion of this type of literature in the indicated course; and therefore, in the English Studies curriculum. Among which we can highlight the following:

1. first approach to what electronic literature is, its main features, and history;
2. appreciate and value women's role in electronic literature -theory and practice-;
3. a first close reading of two digital works written by female authors;
4. beginning of a literary analysis of these two works.

After taking this part of the course students should know of:

1. an overview of what electronic literature is and its history;
2. an understanding of how this literature can be read and analysed;
3. an overview of women's role in electronic literature.

These objectives will be achieved by: three sessions, tutorials with the lecturer, core readings, student exercises and personal work, and assessments. All of which will be duly explained in the methodology section.

3. Methodology

The methodology proposed to carry out the learning/teaching procedure outlined is structured in three two-hours sessions, which will be described below. Before it is necessary explain that the student's group is composed by 144 members and, although they are in their second year, this is the first English Literature course that they have. The first session aims to give an overall view of electronic literature and it gives the necessary resources to continue to deepen their knowledge. The second and the third ones delve into two electronic literature works, *Fitting the Pattern* (2008) and *Pry* (2014), showing how to do a close reading of them. They also offer a summary

of the poetics of the two authors, Christine Wilks and Samantha Gorman. The mandatory and suggesting readings and viewing are specified in the 3.4 section.

3.1. First session

As it was explained above, the proposal of the incorporation of the electronic literature in the study of English and North America Literature is structured in three sessions to be completed with the previous and further student work.

Before this first session students are informed that they need to read an important article on the field: Hayles, N. K. (2007). *Electronic Literature: What is it? And two mandatory viewings, the first part of a webinar with N. Katherine Hayles and Marjorie Luesebrink, and Di Rossario's Are pixels the future of literature?*

These two activities will give an electronic literature introduction and the first contact with one of the most important theorists on this works, N. Katherine Hayles.

The first two hours with the whole group aim to continue introducing students to electronic literature, to have an overall evolution and main collections, and to open to new concepts such as remediation, ergodic, transmedia, etc. To achieve these goals, the students will start sharing, through a series of questions and after the mandatory reading, what electronic literature is and its main features. It is important to clarify what Hayles points out, electronic literature excludes print literature that has been digitized and she affirms that it is "digital born" so you cannot read it outside its digital medium (Hayles, 2008, p. 3). Scott Rettberg defines it as "new forms and genres of writing that explore the specific capabilities of the computer and network- literature that would not be without the contemporary digital context (Rettberg, 2019, p. 2)

The session continues with an explanation of its main characteristics, its evolution and the main collections, supported by digital media and articles that are listed in the 4th section in this text. The excerpt given below is used to explain the connection between post-structural critical theories and electronic literature:

By the 1980s, poets increasingly presented moving language on screen as a result of the development of computers. These experiments prefigure many later works in poetry that proliferated in animated, hypermedia digital formats. The 1980s are an important moment for the history of electronic literature since, in 1985, an international exhibit held in Paris at the Centre Georges Pompidou, titled "*Les Immatériaux*," organized by Jean-François Le Lionnais, the ALAMO6 group introduced its first poems "generated" by a computer, which somehow sanctioned the birth of a new form of visual poetry "animated" by this new medium. The ALAMO group wanted to develop tools and computational methods of use to writers. They have focused on the potentiality of writing "assisted" by the machine, by the computer. By the mid-1980s, moreover, the influence of post-structural critical theories (such as deconstruction) spurred writers and poets to make up new appearances for literature in general (let's think of fictional hypertexts) and for poetry in particular. As for poetry, all the elements promoted by concretists—the visual presentation of texts, graphical effects, a new typography, coloration, repetition—can be easily found in many electronic texts. Computers clearly enable and extend ideas looked for by the concretist aesthetic. Examples of graphical poems made thanks to computer technology had already begun to emerge in the late 1960s. Marc Adrian's *Computer Texts* were featured in the Cybernetic Serendipity exhibition in 1974. The options derived by the possibility to animate the language were also particularly investigated; in fact, animated poems long predated a style of electronic poetic practice that erupted with the advent of the World Wide Web. (Di Rosario, Meza & Grimaldi, 2021, pp. 11-13)

It is essential to give the student three new concepts necessary to understand and approach to this literature. The first one is *ergodic* coin by E. Aarseth in 1997, he explains that he uses term taking from physics that derives from "the Greek words *ergon* and *hodos*, meaning "work" and "path". In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (Aarseth, 1997, p. 1). So, the Norwegian theorist explains a fundamental feature of most electronic literature works as they will experiment in their readings. The students as readers need to understand that the way of reading these works is different, it is a demanding action.

The second concept is *remediation*, the term with which Marshall McLuhan stated that the content of any new medium is an old medium, and later Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin coined the term in their book *Remediation. Understanding New Media* (1999) to refer to how new media transform old media, retaining some of their characteristics while discarding others. In their own words *remediation* "is the way in which one medium is seen by our culture as reforming or improving upon another" (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 59), "the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms" (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 273).

The third and final term is *transmedia* coined by Henry Jenkins in 2003:

Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. (Jenkins, 2007)

As technology changes, so does electronic literature. They are using the new affordances that the new medium offers. Therefore, work's features are changing and also their platforms. But there are collections that help to find important works and the students need to know, among them are the *Electronic Collection* with its four volumes, the *Anthology of European Electronic or Ciberia*.

This first session helps to reach the main elements of this *avant-garde* to which students are approaching and gives them resources to cope with reading and analysing it. For the following session they need to read *Fitting the Pattern* and to watch Christine Wilk's *Talk about Fitting the Pattern*.

3.2. Second Session

The introductory lecture has helped to frame this new type of literature that we are studying. This new one introduces Christine Wilks as an author; her main works and *Fitting the Pattern*. The two hours session is divided into discussion, reading and theoretical moments.

The session starts by sharing student's first impression in reading Wilk's work, their difficulties and its contribution. This part is helped by a series of questions in the available handout. Another question found in the same document is related to the context of the work: where is *Fitting the Pattern* take place? What is the context of this piece? Their answering will be completed by Wilk's own words:

I was born and brought up in the industrial West Riding of Yorkshire, the former heart of the English woollen textile industry in Leeds and Morley, where generations of my family have lived. Morley was a mill town, specialising in the production of shoddy cloth, which, coincidentally, is woven from repurposed fibres, shredded from old woollen garments and blankets. Leeds was the manufacturing birthplace of the ready-to-wear clothing industry and was also a centre of tailoring. Perhaps it was inevitable that my mother and her paternal grandmother had been employed in tailoring. Normally, in those days, women tailoring would only work one part of the garments (collars, button-holes, sleeves, ... I'm guessing those were the things they worked on) but my great grandmother, being resourceful, kept asking to be put to work in different areas. Eventually she worked her way around all the tailoring processes and learnt how to make a full suit. (Wilks in Mencía & Husárová, 2013, pp. 37-38)

After setting the context (North England in the 20th century), it is necessary to go into the work. *Fitting the Pattern* is an interactive, animated, digital narrative work produced in Flash, published in 2008. It is described by her author as a memory in pieces, in fragments.

In the opening image, the reader is given instructions for reading, as well as some clues for understanding the work: it is the pattern for the memoirs of a seamstress' daughter. A table is shown with the proportions that correspond to each size, and information is given on the measurements for which the pattern is prepared, warning of the need to adjust them for the seamstress's daughter, whose size is smaller than the one offered. So, since the begging the students are able the role of the reader in electronic literature.

Fitting the Pattern immerses the reader in the memories of a woman who stops to recall the moments of her past and her mother, who was a dressmaker and whom she evokes through the costumes she sewed for her and her sister; she recalls the discussions, the happy moments, the atmosphere in which she lived, her departure for university, her choice of the artistic world. Throughout the work, Wilks establishes a relationship between her mother's sewing and her artistic work, as two manual processes and where the author is highly influenced by her mother's work. All in all, *Fitting the Pattern* can be described as a memory in pieces, in fragments (Wilks in Mencía & Husárová, 2013, p. 37). So, we can affirm that they are memories that she arrives at by cutting, sewing, pinning, unpicking the past, and exploring the relationship she had with her mother who was a dressmaker (De Gregorio, 2012, p. 76).

The visual design of *Fitting the Pattern* is based on the sewing patterns' aesthetics and their basic elements, such as scissors, pins, patterns, etc. reflecting the tools of a dressmaker, where the plans are simple, with little visual and iconic information, which produces relaxation in the reader, thus making the reader receptive and affectively able to join the story. In order to be able to read, it is necessary to get into the world of sewing and also to start sewing, cutting, unravelling, etc. The students need to realise that in this kind of work the aesthetic and the way the reader interacts are essential in the analysis and the reading.

As an activity in the class and an exercise of close reading they need to work in pairs and look for and analyse the different feelings that each tool shows in relation to the mother that is displayed in:

4. the sewing machine;
5. the scissors;
6. the unpicking;
7. the pins.

Students will comprehend that cutting with scissors triggers memories with negative emotions, while sewing with the machine shows positive feelings. Unpicking threads uncovers incidents where the narrating voice is totally different from her mother and pinning with pins represents the similarities between mother and daughter

(Mencía, M. and Husárová, 2013, p. 40). Furthermore, they will be asked whether these tools can be considered characters in the story or are paratext (it is the opportunity to explain that concept).

The last part of the session will focus on crucial elements on *Fitting the Pattern*, and how Wilks is using the new medium to express herself, and how these new elements need to be analysed. Before finishing, the lecturer will remind them of their assessment: write 400-500 words about how ergodic literature engage or not to the reader and what are the competences of the reader. For the following session they will need to read *Pry*'s prologue, and chapters 1, 3 and 5, and to watch *G4C15: Choose Your Own: New Hybrid Platforms* (from minute 20:43 to 28:00).

3.3. Third session

If in the previous session the aim was to go into a flash work, now it is time to take a closer look to another electronic literature generation, an application created for iOS (iPad, iPhone and iPod). We refer to *Pry*, an interactive novella written by Samantha Gorman and Danny Cannizzaro in 2014. Although we have two authors, one female and one a man, it is considered a female work because Cannizzaro was mostly focused on coding.

As in the previous session, this lecture will open with students discussing their first reaction, difficulties and what surprised and liked the most—followed by a quick comparison between the two works. Then, the class will continue with an introduction to the literary work.

Pry is an interactive application or a novella-app for digital touch screens, it is created by art studio Tender Claws, available only for iOS. It tells us the story of James, a demolition consultant who is losing his life and whose life has been broken after he served in the first Gulf War. It was released in two parts, the first one in 2014 and the following year the second one (De Gregorio, 2019, p. 91). Holly Willis introduces this novella as follows:

Blurring the boundary between reading and watching, the project as a whole integrates still and moving images, sound and text in a story that unfolds through the reader's touch as we pry, pinch, caress, spread and swipe text and images on the screen. *Pry* expands the language of gesture for interactive reading experiences, but, perhaps more significantly, it explores the metaphoric potential of the interface, wherein to pry open the text is to peer into the protagonist's mind while to squeeze the text shut invites us to look outward on the world. (Willis, 2016, p.110).

One of the main features of this electronic literature work is that *Pry* uses all the manipulation possibilities that the iPad makes possible, such as enlarging with the fingers, touching the screen, sliding the finger from one side to the other, etc. The narration uses the whole iPad's affordances to tell the story, to tell the reader in first-person narration, the story of James, an ex-combatant of the first Gulf War who six years later tells, through his thoughts and his subconscious, his past, especially what happened with his friends Luke and Jessie. Through different modalities such as videos, sound, audio, typography, etc. is asking the reader to touch. So, in order to read it, readers need to use their fingers to open to "pry open or pinch closed a virtual window, a space on the surface of the screen. Doing so produces a change on the screen where in text appears beneath the immediate reading surface" (Pressman, 2018, p. 262). Furthermore, as Chetcuty points out, "the object is rendered a representational aspect of the interfacing capabilities of the touchscreen, and none more so than in *Pry*, where it is a synecdoche for both the gesture required to unlock said object and the memory meanings it evokes" (Chetcuty, 2016, p. 257).

It is necessary to help the students to connect the action of pry, the title and its meaning as a metaphor; because it will give them the importance of the movement and the different meanings that they will find in the work:

The metaphor of prying, present in the title and ever-present in our interactions with the application, multiplies the meanings we seek—in the mutable truths behind James's words, in the tangled chronology of his memories, or even in locating his occluded present—just as it constrains our operational input. (Ciccoricco & Large, 2019, p. 68)

Pry is structured in seven chapters, a prologue, an appendix, and an epilogue. Each of these can be accessed from the table of contents. In contrast to the previous work, where the choice of access was limited to cycles of four elements, here the reader is given access to the chapter of his or her choice. However, as each of them is numbered, readers are somehow invited to follow the established order. At the same time, when multiple readings are completed in chapters 1 to 6, readers are rewarded with a diamond or star, up to a maximum of four diamonds in each; with them, more material is available in the Appendix section. This is a characteristic of a video game exploration system.

Pry, as the students have experienced, is an ergodic text, a work that, as Aarseth defined it, requires extra effort in its reading. Moreover, in reading it we are reminded that by choosing one path, such as reading the subconscious, others are left behind and, without the active interaction of the reader, to open the eyes, to read the Bible in Braille, etc., the narrative is stagnant. Thus, from the first chapter the reader is taught how to proceed, and with the help of the diamonds that are obtained, the reader can know if there are still options left, paths to follow to achieve the complete reading of the work, for this reason the reader must return several times to the same text, must have an attitude of construction and search for different strategies in order to approach the whole work,

that is, as Aarseth defines, the ergodic text gives responsibility to the reader, who must make decisions in order for the text to make sense (Aarseth, 1997, p.1).

After an explanation of the whole *Pry's* plot and how the reader accessed to them, it is the moment to carry this part assessment, where the students need to write 400-500 words analysing how the narrator is telling his story and what kind of narrator is he.

3.4. Core and suggested readings

This article offers the inclusion of electronic literature in the course "Introduction to English and North American Literary Studies". It is an introductory course, therefore the sessions dedicated to it are also introductory. For this reason, in this section, it is offered the readings and viewing that are mandatory and will help the students to start studying electronic literature, and four readings that will help them to go one step further.

Mandatory readings

Along with the two literary works to be read, there are two more compulsory readings that offer an introduction to the field. The first one, is a historical overview, while the second one, is one of the most classical articles that defined the field, its origins and first genres.

Di Rosario, G., Meza, N., & Grimaldi, K. (2021) *The Origins of Electronic Literature: An Overview*. In J. O'Sullivan. *Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities: Contexts, Forms, & Practices*. (pp.9-26). Bloomsbury Academic.

Hayles, N. K. (2007). *Electronic Literature: What is it?* *Electronic Literature Organization*. January 2, <https://eliterature.org/pad/elp.html>.

Wilks, C. (2008). *Fitting the Pattern or Being a Dressmaker's Daughter*. <https://crisscross.net/elit/fitting-the-pattern>. Available now at: [https://elo.conifer.rhizome.org/_embed_noborder/elo/fitting-the-pattern/20210426195737\\$br:chrome:76/http://www.fittingthepattern.com/wilks_fitting_the_pattern/FittingThePattern.html](https://elo.conifer.rhizome.org/_embed_noborder/elo/fitting-the-pattern/20210426195737$br:chrome:76/http://www.fittingthepattern.com/wilks_fitting_the_pattern/FittingThePattern.html).

Gorman, S. & Cannizzaro, D. (2014). *Pry. Tender Claws*. Available at Apple Store.

Suggested Readings

In this section, the student will find indispensable handbooks with which to start the study of this avant-garde; and in Mencía's book, they will be able to approach to women theory and work in the field. The chapter that is proposed here, will give an update on the field and lead to reading the other chapters of this new handbook.

Aarseth, E. J. (1997). *Cibertext. Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Grigar, D. (2021). *Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities: An Introduction*. In J. O'Sullivan (Authors), *Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities: Contexts, Forms, & Practices* (pp. 1-5). Bloomsbury Academic, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501363474.ch-001>.

Hayles, N. K. (2008). *Electronic Literature. New Horizons for the Literary*. Notre Dame Press.

Rettberg, S. (2019). *Electronic Literature*. Polity Press.

Mencía, M. (2017). *#WomenTechLit*. Computing Literature.

Mandatory viewing

It is a great opportunity to be able to hear and see N. Katherine Hayles talks about and explaining about electronic literature. She is one of the pioneers in the field and a major narrative and digital narrative theorist. Then, Di Rosario, in an educational and informative talk, as in most of the TED lectures, explains with example the most important about electronic literature. Finally, the two authors of the compulsory literary readings explain their work.

Di Rosario, G. (2018). *Are pixels the future of literature?*. TEDxUCLouvain. <https://youtu.be/7CAaoWcknvM>. *Electronic Literature Webinar: N. Katherine Hayles and Marjorie Luesebrink* (part 1). (27 June, 2021). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mUzkl_6RkVI.

G4C15: Choose Your Own: New Hybrid Platforms (2015). https://youtu.be/uzuES_u4Knc. (From minute 20:43 to 28:00).

Wilks, C. (2018). *Talk about Fitting the Pattern*. https://youtu.be/XIMetNca_Cc.

4. Conclusions

This proposal does not have a quantitative measurement because what it looks for is to recognise and value the new media in the literature. So, the intended results of the inclusion of electronic literature in the English Studies curriculum, at the University of Cadiz are: to introduce students to the literary *avant-garde*; to engage them through new media; to recognise the importance of women in the electronic literature theory and creation. This, the sessions and the compulsory readings and viewings help to reach the result that are expected.

In order to be able to measure student response or the teacher's own assessment it is recommended to write a diary to be handed to the teacher in which the student takes account of the difficulties and the benefits, the possibilities of electronic literature and, then answer the following questionnaire:

1. Do you think it is necessary to study electronic literature in this course?

Yes

No

Other

2. Do you think you are given appropriate resources for the study of electronic literature?

Yes

No

Other

3. Do you prefer online or 'traditional' (paper-based) literature?

Why?

4. Can you name any other electronic literature work you have heard of?

5. What do you think about the resources the lecturer shared with you in class?

6. Have you used them yourself?

Yes, and I found them user-friendly.

Yes, but I was not able to figure out how they worked.

No

Other

7. Would you like to spend more time learning about electronic literature in class?

Yes

No

Other

8. Can you write a paragraph about women's role in electronic literature?

Yes

No

Other

9. Do you think reading *Fitting the Pattern* and *Pry* help as an example of electronic literature?

Yes

No

Other works that you consider are better examples.

10. What do you think electronic literature brings to anglophone literatures?

(Roig-Marín, A; and Prieto, S., 2021)

As these pages have shown, the inclusion of electronic literature in this literature course is possible and enriching. The first session helps to introduce New Media and electronic literature to the students, providing them with resources to continue further delving into it. The students will have an overall view of digital literature history; what are the most important works and, where can they find them; the different kind of literary works that electronic literature involved; how to read them; and, the new concepts that are necessary to know.

The second and third moments include reading and study of two case studies that give students a concrete vision and experience of electronic literature work. The two works, written by female authors, are different. The first one is a web work created in Flash, with a small reader interaction, while the second, is an application that requests an immense reader interaction. By reading and studying *Fitting the Pattern* students find a production stands out for the care taken in the design, which is clean and simple, highlighting the colour white with text or graphics in other colours, such as black and red. All these features encourage the reader's positive attitude towards the work and, even more, the immersion in it. Whereas *Pry* is a multimodal work that develops to the maximum the possibilities and characteristics that the medium, that is, the iPad, offers making digital literature take an enormous step forward in the interaction and multimodality of its works to construct the story. But, in addition, these possibilities and characteristics of the medium are used in this work to reflect a first-person narrator who is in turmoil and enables the reader to access this chaos and personal fracture as if he were the narrator himself. Thus, with the electronic literature incorporated into the English studies curriculum, students have the opportunity to engage with a new kind of literature, to join their use of new technologies with their studies, appreciate it and assess women's role in it.

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