

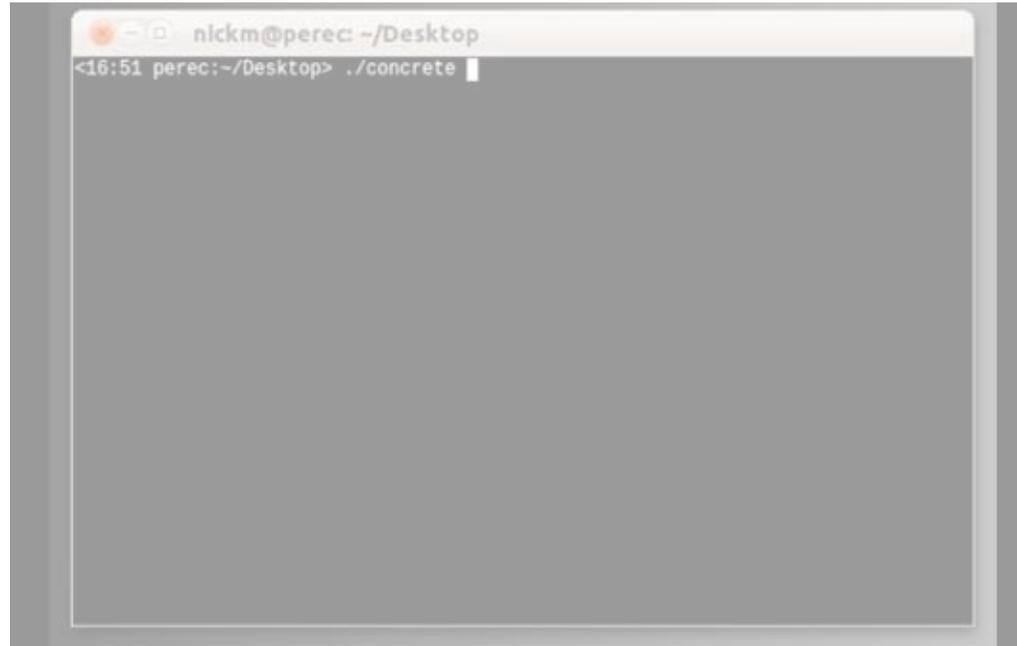
# Poetry in Motion

*Digital media proves to be the very opposite of doomsday to the ancient art form that is literature, but rather an interactive playground that brings the printed words textually, visually, and sonically alive.*

*Nick Montford*

I see electronic literature as something beyond a genre or a literary movement: it's an argument that literary art and literary experience have a place in our digital environment alongside the many other ways that networked computing is used. Those of us working in electronic literature are demonstrating that we can have poetic, imaginative, narrative, conceptual, and other sorts of work and experiences online, in addition to gaming, communication and commercial activities. We don't have to share an aesthetic or hold similar political ideas in order to make this argument together, because we're standing up for something fundamental to future work: the chance to develop and share literature (of any sort) using the capabilities of the computer and the network.

My own focus is on projects that engage collaboration and computation to bring us into a new, disoriented, and potentially productive relationship with the computer and the world. A recent project that is both highly collaborative and highly computational is *Sea and Spar Between*, a poetry generator Stephanie Strickland and I developed. In it, we bring together words from the



vocabulary of Melville and Dickinson, present a sea of textual data that is far beyond the human ability to read but which can be understood in some ways, and suggest a collaborative, computational, and literary-historical perspective on the natural world. In my "solo career" I have written very short programs such as those in the *ppg256* series and those in the set *Concrete Perl*, to investigate, poetically, how computation and a particular programming language hook into the English language.

Some of my other collaborative e-lit projects are *Implementation* with Scott Rettberg and *Three Rails Live* with Scott and Roderick Coover, both of these dealing with urban and global experiences by cutting up narrative forms in new ways.

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### Stephanie Strickland

The Electronic Literature Organization, on whose Board I sit, has published two anthologies, some 120+ works from 16 countries. An astounding variety of forms are included: text movies, poem generators, codework, interactive fiction, Second Life excursions, chatterbot drama, textual instruments, augmented reality, games, animations—and more; works made for screen, for gallery installation, and for virtual environments. Today, too, a great number of works are made for mobile devices. Already we envision biolit, neurolit, nanolit, whilst the developing life of code and writing is still in its infancy.

Many fear the effects of code on literature—Adam Kirsch in the November 2012 issue of *Poetry* says, “The condensation of millions of books on a single device, or their evaporation in a data cloud, seems to presage what is destined to happen to our souls, to the coming end of selfhood, even of embodiment.” Code does inflect soul, self, and body: it is a game-changing, a profound inflection to explore.

I began in 1995. I was writing *True North*, a book of poems that seemed to want to be read in the round. It exists today in print and as a hypertext, but even today I couldn’t make it the way I envisioned then, a full three-dimensional choreography. Alan Sondheim enacts 3-D choreographies in Second Life, but I wanted a portable installation, a room-size space, five gyroscopically twirling marker poems, a bounding sky of stars, weather.

In the poetry generator *Sea and Spar Between*, Nick Montfort and I use a very tiny amount of code to define a sea of language—and being at-sea there—in a space populated by a number of poetry stan-

zas comparable to the population of fish in the sea, around 225 trillion. The words in *Sea and Spar Between* come from Emily Dickinson’s poems and Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, and the computer generates the stanzas. To create this generator we used counting methods and human intuition. Using counting methods, we collected words used by one, but not both, of the authors; created certain easily enumerated categories, such as words ending in the syllable “less”; and assembled compound kennings from words used frequently by one or both.

In all my digital poems the computer is a non-human reader. For me both code and image can be as deceptive as words, but when all three mediate each other—rather than one prevailing over the others—a fuller outcome can occur.

### Mark C. Marino

Flipping pages on an iPad is such a pleasant, virtually tactile experience that book lovers can painlessly make the transition from their beloved acid-free codexes. We finally have a solution to the traditional complaint that you can’t take a computer to bed. Now, you can, and your bedmate is sleek and will dress up like a book, as you desire.

The phenomenon of a medium imitating another is called remediation, a term coined by Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin to describe the early-childhood of each new medium. Early movies, for example, filmed actors with a stationary camera like an audience member seated before a play. This trend has only continued with the computer, a machine that can act like any other machine.

Except, Bolter and Grusin make clear that reme-

mediation is only a phase, the moment before the medium develops its own form, while it is still looking backward to what came before it. What will the electronic text look like then if not a book?

Since the advent of the computational machine, artists have been experimenting with new forms. Noah Wardrip-Fruin traces these experiments back to Christopher Strachey's love letter generator on the Eniac. In the 1970s, a new kind of textual experience emerged with William Crowther's ADVENTURE. In the 1960s Joseph Weizenbaum created the first conversation agent or chatbot system, ELIZA. Early experiments in Europe played with a screen-based telephone system.

Under the name of "electronic literature" (e-lit for short), there stands the literary potential of computational spaces. In 1998, The Electronic Literature Organization was formed and it has since joined an international consortium of artists and scholars working in digital literature. It has published two collections of e-lit and has an on-going directory project with sister projects in Europe, Canada, and Australia. Even a brief exploration of these spaces offers a glimpse at the vast array of artistic styles and genres.

All of these experiments now have taken new form. Games and interactive dramas like *Facade*, *Prom Week*, and *Sleep is Death* offer readers the chance to stage and engage in interpersonal conflicts. The children of Adventure write "interactive fiction," emblemized by the IF Comp (an annual IF prize). Visual poetry, like the work of Jim Andrews, has extended the project of concrete poetry into a dynamic, computational space. Literary hypertexts have continued to evolve from Michael Joyce's *Afternoon* (1987) to Judy Maloy's *From Ireland in with Letters* (2012). The



works of Amaranth Borsuk and Caitlin Fisher continue to explore uses of Augmented Reality in literary works. Contemporary projects like Tokyo Gorge and its variants make poetry generators themselves a literary form.

And projects have emerged that seem to hold computers as the reader. John Cayley and Daniel Howe's reading machines explore computational reading and writing practices. Some call 'the new aesthetic' this creation of art with machine-readers in mind.

**Mark C. Marino is a practicing electronic poet, Head of Communications at the Electronic Literature Organisation and teaches on the Writing program at the University of Southern California.**



## Alison Clifford

I initially studied English literature as an undergraduate and then went on to study a Master in Digital Art at the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona. It was there that I started experimenting with Electronic Literature. I was interested in how the computer as a creative medium might be used to alter our understanding of story-telling and creative writing more generally. The Sweet Old Etcetera is a work that reinterprets the poetry of E.E. Cummings, considering how characteristics available to the computer – programming, motion, interactivity, multimedia – might enhance our experience of it. Overall the work is a personal response to the playful spirit of the poems.