

Meghan Griffin
ENG 6801
Dr. Saper

Assignment Three: Part I

Chapter one of Hayles' *Electronic Literature* addresses electronic literature's risk of "being doomed to the realm of ephemera" due to its quickly evolving nature and reliance on technologies constantly rendered obsolete (40). Whereas print literature "developed mechanisms for its preservation and archiving" the "fluid nature of digital texts have no such system" (39). In chapter one of *Electronic Literacy*, Hayles works to capture a brief history of electronic literature and to offer a method of critique and genre categorization that will work as a critical mechanism mediating the field's risk toward ephemera.

To begin her discussion of e-lit, Hayles situates electronic literature in relation to print text. Hayles explains that "readers come to digital work with expectations framed by print," yet electronic literature builds on these expectations while it transforms them (4). To invert traditional understanding of electronic literature in relation to print, Hayles suggests that "print is more properly considered a particular output form of electronic text than an entirely separate medium" (5). With the relationship between e-lit and print drawn, the question arises whether critique of e-lit will mirror print criticism as we "shift from print to programmable media" (24). Hayles argues that while the new e-lit genre requires focus on the "specificity of networked and programmable media" it also allows for "traditional critical practice and philosophical writing" (24).

Hayles offers a conceptual framework for the evolution of electronic literature by describing its movements in terms of genres. Hayles explains that genres in e-lit work along two divisions: the different ways a user experiences texts, as well as the structure and specificity of each work's underlying code (5). She delineates "hypertext fiction, network fiction, interactive fiction, locative narratives, installation pieces, 'code work,' generative art, and Flash poem" as genres which construct the whole of electronic literature to date (30). With examples for each movement, Hayles describes the technological developments that make each successive genre possible.

The Electronic Literature Organization defines electronic literature as "work with an important literary aspect that takes advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer" (*qtd.* 3). From that broad definition, electronic literature can be classified into the genres Hayles names. The earliest e-lit genre is characterized by the hypertext link and is associated with Storyspace software. Hypertext was highly influential through 1995 when the second genre—network fiction—incorporated multimedia capabilities with the growth of the internet. Interactive fiction is differentiated by "stronger game elements" and embodied metaphors (8). Locative narratives are characterized by "immersion in actual three-dimensional spaces" (11). "Code work" is characterized by the "linguistic practice in which English (or some other natural language) is hybridized with programming expressions to create a creole" (20). For generative art, "an algorithm is used either to generate texts according to a randomized scheme or to scramble and rearrange preexisting texts" (18). These genres outline a history of electronic literature that focuses on differences in user experiences and underlying technologies. Work of this kind is essential to ensuring that e-lit does not fall prey to the risk of becoming ephemera.

Works Cited

Hayles, N. Katherine. *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame, 2008.