1 Introduction

The late August sun streams warmly through the Venetian blinds above my desk in the Electronic Literature Lab (ELL) at Washington State University Vancouver (WSUV). A decades-old yet fully functional Macintosh Performa 5215 CD hums in front of me. In my nervously quivering hands, I hold the cool, smooth vinyl of a folio containing one of the first works of hypertext literature ever published: issue 1:1 of the *Eastgate Quarterly Review of Hypertext* (*EQRH*), a stand-alone, digital literary periodical showcasing hypertext literature produced and distributed by Eastgate Systems, Inc., between 1994 and 1995. The folio covers open with a reluctant pop, as if imploring me to respect their age and leave them untouched. I carefully wriggle out one of the 3.5-inch floppy disks squeezed into the front flap. It has "for Macintosh" printed on its sticky label. As the disk clicks into its drive, I find myself rejoicing at the all-too-familiar sound that takes me back decades – a shuttling, crackling noise that tells me in a long-forgotten, machinic code that the computer is reading the disk. I viscerally recall the sheer delight this noise used to evoke in me decades ago, and I can feel it now as poignantly as I used to – a multisensory, haptic rhythm that seems to be shaking the entire body of the computer, and with it, my hands on the worn beige plastic mouse and keyboard. On the downward flickering, black-and-white monitor display a window tells me the software is loading . . .

This Element is a work of literary digital media archeology aimed at preserving historical literary practices and material works threatened by obsolescence. It examines a watershed moment in the recent history of digital publishing: the *Eastgate Quarterly Review of Hypertext* (*EQRH*) – a stand-alone digital periodical featuring experimental forms of early, pre-web electronic literature (e-literature). The *EQRH* celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary while I was writing this manuscript. "Serious hypertext" publisher Eastgate Systems, based in Watertown, Massachusetts, under the aegis of Mark Bernstein, curated and produced it. Its underlying agenda – to innovate short-form literary and nonliterary publishing through evolving digital technologies – was revolutionary and risky because it had no comparable commercial precedent for its business model – at least not in North

America.[1] Hypertext writing (poetry, short fiction, and scholarly nonfiction) was afforded exclusively by stand-alone, mainframe computers, early Macintoshes in particular, which came with HyperCard – a key tool for early hypertext writers. Yet, despite its innovative potential at a time when home computers became a widely accessible commodity, "serious hypertext" has been struggling to leave its niche existence.

For its production, pre-web hypertext required specialized, nonlinear, and often costly authoring software such as Hypergate, Storyspace, and HyperCard. Unlike video games and commercial print writing, it was never conceptualized as a mainstream form of entertainment and/or scholarship, which complicated the financial situation of Eastgate Systems. With the World Wide Web launching as a new mass distribution and publishing platform in the mid-1990s, it quickly became obvious that the *EQRH*'s stand-alone medial approach was subject to evanescence, despite its potential and zealous pursuit to innovate literary periodical publishing. Nonetheless, the series remains a gold mine of historical, platform-specific, nonlinear writing because it affords insights into medium-specific, creative authoring practices that reflect their scholarly paradigm in pioneering ways that heralded the transformation of literature into literary media (Hayles 2008; Thomas, Round, and Ensslin forthcoming).

Widely unavailable, the *EQRH* is notoriously under-researched and threatened by obsolescence. To make a much-needed contribution to the preservation of early, pre-web e-literature, I spent several weeks in the pre-pandemic summer of 2019 at the Electronic Literature Archive at WSUV – one of the few archives in the world that holds copies of all eight *EQRH* issues and the historical hardware devices needed to read them in the original. During my archival research, I performed so-called traversals (Moulthrop and Grigar 2017), a form of medium-specific, serendipitous yet nonetheless deep and iterative reading, of the historical material (see Section 1.2). This experience was a visceral one, allowing me to read in a fully embodied way, taking into account the multisensory, platform-specific interplay that is so critical to medium-specific and media-conscious analysis (Hayles 2004; Ryan and Thon 2014; Ensslin and Bell 2021).

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[1] In France, however, the Lecture Art Innovation Recherche Ecriture (LAIRE) collective led by Philippe Bootz and Tibor Papp had already launched a transmedia and digital poetry review, *alire*, in 1989.

Viewed through publishing history and hypertext theory lenses, this study offers an account of the *EQRH* as a key threshold phenomenon in recent literary publishing. Historically, the *EQRH* follows in the tradition of the modernist "little magazine" (Drouin and Huculak 2016), an experimental, niche concept that produced many short-lived periodical publications from the early twentieth century onward. While there is a host of information on how the advent of the Web in the early to mid-1990s led to a prolonged crisis of the publishing industry more broadly, there is a dearth of dedicated studies documenting how these transformations, coupled with the rapid growth of the dot.com bubble and the ascent of fourth-generation gaming platforms, affected the operations of digital literary subcultures manifesting themselves in coterie-based publishing experiments like the *EQRH*. Surely the *EQRH* was not the only experiment in literary periodical publishing at the time. Digital media zines like Adam Engst's *TidBITS* were published on floppy disk, and between 1985 and 1997, the Voyager Company pioneered film, fiction, and nonfiction on LazerDisk and CD-ROM. However, none of these competitor enterprises had as lasting and field-defining an effect as the Eastgate hypertexts did. Access issues notwithstanding, every student of e-literature and digital-born fiction will sooner or later come across the canonical work published by Eastgate, facilitated by online preservation initiatives like *Rebooting Electronic Literature* (Grigar et al. 2018; Grigar et al. 2019; Grigar et al. 2020) and web translations like Richard Holeton's *Figurski at Findhorn on Acid* (figurskiatfindhornonacid.com; Grigar et al. 2021). Although Eastgate's book-inspired stand-alone publishing model was soon replaced with web-based publications like *Tekka* and *Hypertext Reading Room*, as well as numerous other online literary magazines specializing in either paper-under-glass or more digital-born forms of writing, the legacy of the *EQRH* as an emblem of Eastgate's pivotal role in the emergent e-literature community cannot be overstated.

In Section 3, I offer analyses of all fiction, poetry, nonfiction materials, and paratextual commentaries published in the *EQRH*. They include works that have never or at best minimally been researched or written about before. This lack of attention, which paradoxically runs counter to the *EQRH*'s importance for literary media history, is a direct effect of inaccessibility. The works are only available on physical, out-of-stock disks that can only be accessed in their original forms via obsolete hardware. Characteristic of Eastgate's approach to serious hypertext publishing, the works were distributed in vinyl and cardboard folios containing print materials and electronic data carriers such as 3.5-inch floppy disks and CD-ROMs. These unique paratextual features convey a "bookish" feeling demonstrating that these media objects were meant to be put on shelves, similar to books and print journals (Pressman 2020). That this physically print-refashioning agenda would soon be overridden by the fast-evolving online and download culture of the emergent Web was barely foreseeable at the time, no matter how predictable it may appear to today's audiences.

In this introduction, I explain the conceptual and terminological framework underlying this book – particularly the decision to configure aspects of medium-specific lore for this project. I provide an overview of the theoretical lenses underpinning my work, casting light on the importance of embedding medium-specific literary history firmly within the socio-material turn of publishing and textual theory, and looking to insights from digital modernism in framing the *EQRH* and its artistic conceptualization. I close with a more detailed examination of how lore can be understood as a critical tool for subverting entrenched political and societal structures and as a systematic method of qualitative participant research.

1.1 Conceptual Framework and Terminology

According to an early (2006) definition proposed by the Electronic Literature Organization, e-literature is an art form that "works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the standalone or networked computer" (quoted in Rettberg 2019: 4). It is born digital in the sense that it is "written for and read on a computer screen [and] pursues its verbal, discursive and/or conceptual complexity through the digital medium, and would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium" (Bell et al. 2010). Electronic literature pushes the boundaries of digital media's technical and material affordances, often critiquing and subverting their corporate, neoliberal underpinnings. Common experimental forms include hypertext and hypermedia; interactive fiction; literary video games and touchscreen apps; kinetic, generative, bot, and sound poetry; locative, ambient, and virtual reality/augmented reality (VR/AR) works; and social media literature such as Instapoetry and Twitterature as well as site-specific installations (Rettberg 2019). The list continuously evolves as new platforms and technologies become available, and much e-literature either programmatically defies genre categorization or becomes genre-defining retroactively.

What exactly "literature" and "literary" refer to is of course a moot point. Many works created and studied by members of the e-literature community do not have any written element to them, contrary to the original meaning of the Latin *litterae* (letters and other types of written documents) (Ensslin 2014). Some do not feature any human language at all. María Mencía's Flash poem "Birds Singing Other Birds' Songs" (2001), for example, experiments with digital birdsong as a "new poetic form of language" that transcends human communication as a reflection of its breakdown (di Rosario 2017: 274). Other works of e-literature, such as John Cayley's "riverIsland" (2007), are codeworks and/or works of combinatory poetry that foreground the source code as a poetic object and its interplay with the user interface. Yet others, like J. R. Carpenter's "Etheric Ocean" (2014), have more in common with performance art than what one may customarily associate with the private, individualized consumption of text on a page or screen.

Equally important, the elitist, Leavisite, "High Culture" undertones often associated with the term *literature* are often dismissed by e-literature scholars and artists. After all, digital technologies' evanescence is decidedly anti-canonical. A medium-conscious, digital-born notion of canon must move away from "seminal, normative and timeless" principles of canonization (Schweikle and Schweikle 1990, 232) to a more open, fluid, and nonnormative notion combining thereness, critical potential, and replicable accessibility (Ensslin 2020a). A work's existence in space, time, and community alone reflects a key moment in socio-technological history that might otherwise go unnoticed or remain undocumented.

"Literary" as a transmedial and transcultural adjective and "the literary" as a collective noun yield a much broader and more inclusive range of possible meanings than its etymological base, "literature." As Hayles (2008) suggests, "the literary" lends itself to a host of "creative artworks that interrogate the histories, contexts, and productions of literature, including as well the verbal art of literature proper" (4–5). Simultaneously, it reflects the ways in which literary media studies have become a transdisciplinary undertaking examining not only the conceptual, political, and intellectual but also the methodological conventions of media studies, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, social and data sciences, digital humanities, and many more.

Electronic literature has, over the past decade, expanded into a fully institutionalized discipline, attracting hundreds of scholars, artists, writers, curators, and media developers from around the world to its annual conferences, and building multinational, government-funded archives and databases of e-literature (CELL, ELD, and ELMCIP), as well as open-access scholarly journals like the *electronic book review* and *The Digital Review*. As a highly collaborative, multimodal trans-discipline, e-literature encapsulates multiple notions of comparative literature, in that it is multinational, multilingual, multi- and cross-platform, pre- and post-digital, as well as multimodal and – more often than not – multiauthored. In many ways, it epitomizes world literature in the sense of continuing and continually remediating a common creative practice of neo-Oulipian "writing under constraint" (Tabbi 2010). More recently, and inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, the Electronic Literature Organization has moved its largely formalist agenda into more politicized territory – for example, by introducing bespoke fellowships to "augment anti-racism." Hence, no matter how controversial and in some ways outdated the term *literature* might seem to many, its persistence in *electronic literature* reflects the discipline's radical cultural, semiotic, and technological inclusivity and its openness to continuous innovation, nonnormativity, and transformation. In *electronic literature*, literature thus becomes both formally malleable and politically progressive, global, and inclusive.

I have settled on the use of "pre-web" to describe the works under examination because they chronologically predated the Web not as a platform for commercialization but as an outlet for creative expression and artistic innovation. Web-based hypertexts and hypermedia did not begin to proliferate until the mid-to-late 1990s, with the emergence of graphic browsers and multimedia editors like Macromedia (later Adobe) Flash. This does not mean that works published before that paradigm shift, also known as first-generation hypertexts (Hayles 2002), did not contain any graphical or color elements. As elaborated in Section 3, a surprisingly large number of works published in the *EQRH* feature pixel graphics and even some early elements of color.

The *EQRH* emerged during the early years of what is now retrospectively known as Web 1.0. As hypertext author and scholar Stuart Moulthrop put it,

> I'd call the *Eastgate Quarterly* more para-web than pre-web. That is, the WWW was well established when [the] *EQ* started up, it was publicized on the Web as well as in print, and the concept of highly structured hypertext that animated the project, at least in part, was a response to the early commercial Web and its "diving boards into the darkness," as Ted Nelson inimitably put it. (Interview)

Moulthrop's use of "para" does not echo the meanings of Genettian paratext as the text surrounding the canonical, main text body of a novel, for example. Rather, the prefix here refers to a sense of "next-ness or approximation: parallel" (interview), signaling the coexistence of several competing models of hypertextual connectivity in the late 1980s and early 1990s that led, amongst other things, to the rejection of Tim Berners-Lee and Robert Cailliau's paper on the World Wide Web by the program committee of the 1991 ACM/Hypertext conference.

> The Web . . . was only one notorious inflection of that concept [of links and networks]. . . . There was huge regret about the constraints of client-server architecture. We [in the Eastgate hypertext community] had our elegant and complex flying machines and looked down our noses at

> what [we] considered clumsier mechanics. (Moulthrop, interview)

The third potentially puzzling element in the title of this book grew out of a conversation with hypertext scholar, archivist, and curator Dene Grigar during my archival research for this study in August 2019. In our preparations for a video interview series with emeritus scholar and hypertext philosopher David Kolb (Grigar 2019), we came to lament that a host of unpublished information circulating amongst writers, scholars, and publishers of early hypertext literature and embedded in their memories and joint nostalgic musings has never been documented in any systematic way. Capturing this "lore" requires in-depth preparation including ethical considerations as well as systematic elicitation, interviewing, recording, and participant review. All of these elements were part of this research.

Nowadays, much of the conceptually oral knowledge we associate with lore will customarily be handed down by (written or spoken) word of mouth on social media. Yet this was not the case in the early to mid-1990s, when copies of floppy disks were passed around by hand or snail mail carrier, and informal information was only beginning to be communicated via email. Hardly anybody took the pains to record spoken scholarly conversations during what are now known to be groundbreaking and field-defining conferences, such as the first Hypertext conferences starting in 1987. These events featured no lesser than Tim Berners Lee, Ted Nelson, Andries van Dam, Jeff Conklin, Peter Brown, and Douglas Engelbart, and congregated a range of literary movers and shakers around proto social media platforms (MUDs and MOOs) like *The Well* and Robert Coover's *Hypertext Hotel*.

To Eastgate founder and "serious hypertext" pioneer Mark Bernstein, the Hypertext conferences likely meant "some kind of currency" (Douglas, interview) with the emergent hypertext writing community. These events proved to be a key incubation platform for soliciting new ideas and publications as they brought together existing and new talent. In her account of how she became involved with hypertext writing, *EQRH* author and Eastgate editor Kathryn Cramer reports on its evolving digital-literary subculture thus:

> I went to Hypertext ’93 . . . in Seattle. . . . And it was . . . transcendent fun. [Many] Eastgate writers [were there] . . . like [Deena] Larsen, . . . Stuart Moulthrop [and] Mary Kim [Arnold]. . . . Kevin Hughes, who was actually one of the founders of the World Wide Web, . . . was part of our little [group, and so was] Brian Thomas, who did *If Monks had Macs*. . . . And we . . . . wrote this thing called the “Black Mark,” . . . which we published as a kind of *samizdat* . . . of what was going on in the conference. [W]e wrote manifestos and said snarky things about what some of the presenters had said. And I was the editor of that and . . . it was . . . a very exciting time. And I remember I had not seen the World Wide Web before. Although my father had because he had the second website in the State of Washington. He’s a nuclear physicist and had been at CERN; . . . so we went over to the nuclear physics lab at the University of Washington, . . . so that Kevin Hughes could show us the World Wide Web. [W]e had to actually go somewhere and do that. . . . And . . . there were papyrus scrolls or something that you could see and click on. It was like, wow. (Interview)

Cramer’s memory reflects a mixture of admiration and awe for the nascent technology, and it embeds the experience in the avant-garde, subversive spirit of the emergent hypertext community at the time. Importantly, in early 1993 it was not yet clear which networked technology would eventually become mainstream. Equally critical is that the e-literature community’s experimental-subversive outlook persisted then and now by exploiting and materially critiquing commercial platforms, as well as by offering its own counter-technologies.

This elucidates the pertinent, ongoing dilemma as well as an ethical, logistical, and technological challenge facing digital literary culture: the clash between the constant need and drive for innovation as a simultaneously teleological and subversive process, and the concomitant yet controversial demand for preservation. As Moulthrop and Grigar (2017) remind us, this dilemma "involves a very literal kind of rescue: the attempt to preserve fragile artistic achievements against the eroding force of obsolescence . . . that will eventually affect most works of culture in the digital age" (3). The "void" opening up through ever-accelerating "technical progress" (3) threatens to swallow up hundreds if not thousands of human–machine creations every year, and I agree with Moulthrop and Grigar that it is the responsibility and duty of digital scholars to preserve as many of those works as possible because the corporate world will not do us this favor.

The *EQRH* works follow a medium-conscious and medium-reflexive agenda, providing insights into how evolving digital platforms were received and debated at the time. Second, the *EQRH* testifies to a distinct, historic "moment of possibility" (Moulthrop and Grigar 2017: 4) that arose out of the early Web and the temporary uncertainty about which technology would ultimately persist and transform into a global mass medium. This moment was decisive for the development of the Web and how we experience it today, both as a global hypermedium and as a literary-convergent platform for creative expression, experimentation, publication, reception, interaction, participation, destruction, and preservation.

1.2 Digital Modernism and Social Materialism

This study takes as its theoretical underpinnings two important streams within literary-digital culture: digital modernism and social materialism. The former seeks to distance itself from many early attempts at explaining hypertextual multi-linearity and non-closure in terms of postmodern play with subjectivities, textual deconstruction, and the demise of the author as a godlike originator of a singular work (Barthes 1977). According to Jessica Pressman, digital modernism "build[s] bridges between modernism and digital literature, print textuality and computational technologies, literary criticism and media studies" (2014: 22). Especially in early forms of e-literature, the remediation of print (Bolter and Grusin 1997) was eminently visible–despite multiple scholarly attempts to herald "the end of books" as we know them (Coover 1992), the demise of print (Bolter 1991), and the erosion of the book's hegemony in a new, hypertextual paradigm