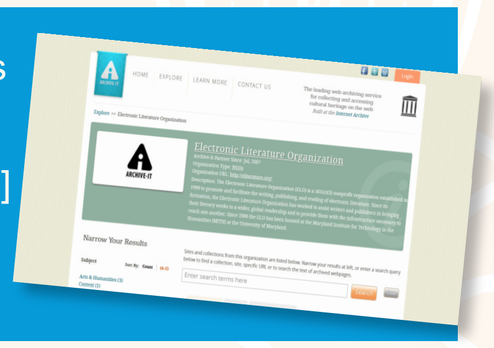
USING WEB ARCHIVES TO CONSTRUCT THE HISTORY OF AN ACADEMIC FIELD

Tegan Pyke
University of Bergen
tegan.pyke@uib.no

INTRODUCTION

The field of electronic or digital literature is a relatively new one, in the grand scale of the sciences, emerging alongside contemporary computing technology. The Electronic Literature Organization (ELO), founded in 1999, is the first and largest international research organisation with a focus on electronic literature. By following its approach to documenting and archiving electronic literary works, we can see how the English language field has been formed.

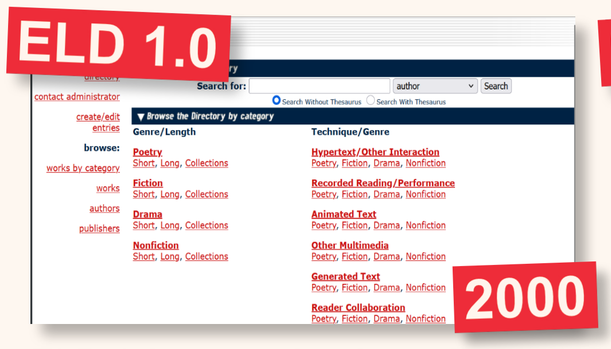
Descriptions from initial ELD 2.0 entries and the Archive-It Electronic Literature Organization Collection are identical. Messages [7][8] and publications [9][10] from the time indicate both projects were led by a single production team.



CHANGING APPROACHES TO DOCUMENTATION AND CONCEPTUALISATION

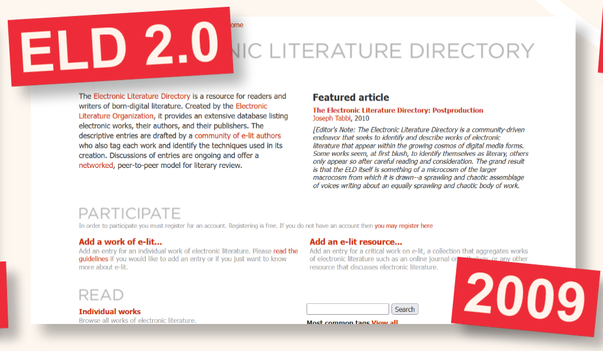
In 2000, the ELO began identifying, collating, and documenting works of digital literature by adapting Robert Kendall's *Word Circuits* directory into the Electronic Literature Directory (ELD) [1]. By tracking changes to the ELD over the ensuing two decades using Internet Archive captures, it's possible to follow changes in the ELO's understanding of electronic literature.

These changes in approach reflect shifting attitudes seen within scholarship. Most notable of these is the rejection of traditional literary genre formulations, which were seen as too rigid for digital literature [2][3].



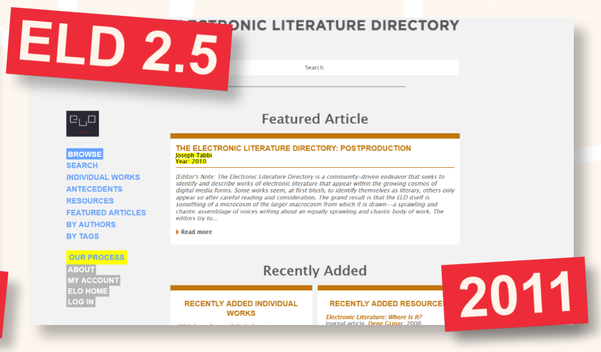
ELD 1.0 was a **database link directory**, with a focus on collecting links to creative works, authors, and publishers. This reliance on continued hosting of external content meant that, by 2007, the directory was affected by the ravages of link rot.

Creative **works were categorised by print literary form**: poetry, fiction, drama, and nonfiction [4]. Meanwhile, the ELD's inclusion criteria specifies works that cannot 'be published in print without sacrificing or altering significant elements' [5].



ELD 2.0 focuses on documenting works via **links, written descriptions and screenshots**. A folksonomic tagging system was incorporated into the design, intended to create a working electronic literature vocabulary [3].

Print literary categorisation is dropped. Inclusion criteria was also changed to match a definition of electronic literature decided upon by an ELO committee in 2004 [2]. In this definition, all references to electronic literature being unable to be printed are removed [6].



Following the integration of the ELD into the Consortium for Electronic Literature (CELL), folksonomic tagging was removed in favour of the CELL's metadata standards (see below).

Though a definition of electronic literature remains in different ELD pages over the next decade [11][12], web captures of the central ELO website capture **removal of the definition** in 2018 [13][14]. This signals **a widening inability of scholars to reach a consensus** on what marks electronic literature as a distinguishable form [15].

GLOBALISATION

Recognising the fractured approach to electronic literature documentation and archival due to grant funding and internationally located research groups, in 2011 the ELO founded the Consortium for Electronic Literature (CELL). CELL produced a search aggregator for member databases, launched in 2015, that **required members to adopt the CELL Element Set**, 'a standard for bibliographical data on creative works of electronic literature' [16].

After an unsuccessful 2016 grant application with the National Endowment of the Humanities [16], CELL became largely dormant. Of the 12 CELL organization members listed since 2018 [17], three are now offline and five are no longer curating their collections.

(RE)DISCOVERED

With lost versions of documentation efforts still available as captures in the Internet Archive, it's possible to identify and (sometimes) access early works of electronic literature which have gone unrecorded in scholarship. This includes *Bubbe's Back Porch* (1995-2000), a collective narrative created by interactive multimedia designer Abbe Don [18].

FUTUREPROOFING

In 2024, the Centre for Digital Narrative at the University of Bergen began to revitalise CELL. As part of this project, **emphasis has been placed on data decentralisation**, with plans including **utilisation of Wikidata** [19]. This solves a persistent issue encountered by electronic literature repositories regarding name authority [16] and loss of data as silo sites go offline.

This effort, combined with web archival projects including the Archive-It ELO Collection, the UK Web Archive's New Media Writing Prize Collection and ELO's The NEXT, will bolster the possibilities for quantitative and qualitative data analyses surrounding the field of electronic literature.

REFERENCES

[1] R. Kendall, 'Stalking the Wild Hypertext: The Electronic Literature Directory', Word Circuits. Accessed: Nov. 22, 2023. [Online]. Available: https://web.archive.org/web/20010204045000/http://www.wordcircuits.com/comment/htlit_7.htm
[2] 'Genres of Electronic Literature', in Electronic Literature, Cambridge, UK Medford, MA: Polity press, 2019, pp. 1–19.
[3] J. Tabbi, 'Toward a Semantic Literary Web: Setting a Direction for the Electronic Literature Organization's Directory'. Electronic Literature Organization, Jan. 29, 2007. Accessed: Dec. 14, 2023. [Online]. Available: https://eliterature.org/pad/slw.html
[4] Electronic Literature Organization, 'Electronic Literature Directory', Electronic Literature Organization. Accessed: Nov. 01, 2023. [Online]. Available: https://web.archive.org/web/20001109191400/https://directory.eliterature.org/
[5] Electronic Literature Organization, 'Contributor Introduction', Electronic Literature Directory. Accessed: Dec. 05, 2023. [Online]. Available: http://web.archive.org/web/20010424051056/http://directory.eliterature.org/cgi-bin/texis/authors/intro.html
[6] Electronic Literature Organization, 'Guidelines for creating Directory entries', Electronic Literature Directory. Accessed: Mar. 04, 2025. [Online]. Available: https://web.archive.org/web/20100328193828/http://directory.eliterature.org/entry-guidelines
[7] J. Nelson, '[ELO-LAB] net format for collaboration on 300', Aug. 27, 2007.
[8] J. Tabbi, '[ELO-LAB] Reviewers needed for conference proposals', Jan. 06, 2008.
[9] J. Tabbi, 'On Reading 300 Works of Electronic Literature: Preliminary Reflections', On the Human. Accessed: Mar. 21, 2025. [Online]. Available: https://web.archive.org/web/20091103094259/http://onthehuman.org/2009/07/on-reading-300-works-of-electronic-literature-preliminary-reflections/
[10] P. Tomaszek, 'Reading, Describing, and Evaluating Electronic Literature for Archiving', SPIEL, vol. 29, no. 1–2, pp. 255–265, Jan. 2010.
[11] Electronic Literature Organization, 'Our process', Electronic Literature Directory. Accessed: Mar. 25, 2025. [Online]. Available: https://web.archive.org/web/20120505211322/http://directory.eliterature.org:80/process
[12] Electronic Literature Organization, 'Guidelines for creating Individual Work entries', Electronic Literature Directory. Accessed: Mar. 25, 2025. [Online]. Available: https://web.archive.org/web/20200918110028/https://directory.eliterature.org/basic-page/4579
[13] Electronic Literature Organization, 'What is E-Lit?', Electronic Literature Organization. Accessed: Mar. 04, 2025. [Online]. Available: https://web.archive.org/web/20171009220719/http://eliterature.org:80/what-is-e-lit/
[14] Electronic Literature Organization, 'Our Role', Electronic Literature Organization. Accessed: Mar. 04, 2025. [Online]. Available: https://web.archive.org/web/20171106212758/http://eliterature.org:80/what-is-e-lit
[15] T. Pyke, 'Digital Literature: An Essentially Contested Concept?', presented at the Electronic Literature Organization (Un)Linked 2024, Florida, USA, Jul. 21, 2024. [Online]. Available: https://stars.library.ucf.edu/elo2024/hypertextsandfictions/schedule/18/
[16] C. Baldwin, 'CELL: On the Consortium for Electronic Literature (NEH White Paper)', West Virginia University Research Corporation, White Paper 112095, Mar. 2016. [Online]. Available: doi.org/10.17613/M6KH2B
[17] Consortium for Electronic Literature, 'CELL Project', CELL Project. Accessed: Mar. 25, 2025. [Online]. Available: https://web.archive.org/web/20180528162408/http://cellproject.net:80/
[18] A. Don, 'Bubbe's Back Porch', Bubbe's Back Porch. Accessed: Mar. 25, 2025. [Online]. Available: https://web.archive.org/web/20040901161118/http://bubbe.com/
[19] H. Ackermans, J. Tabbi, T. Pyke, and C. Robinson, '(Un)Linked Open Data: Documenting E-lit in Wikidata', presented at the ELO (Un)Linked 2024, Florida, USA, Jul. 20, 2024. [Online]. Available: https://stars.library.ucf.edu/elo2024/hypertextsandfictions/schedule/29

Center for Digital Narrative

UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN