Digital Poetry and Critical Discourse: A Network of Self-References?
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Abstract
This article emerges from macroanalysis of several works of critical writing in the field of digital poetry, which have been documented in the ELMCIP Knowledge Base. The problems addressed in this context are the self-referentiality exhibited by authors who are both practitioners and theoreticians, and the need for a wider selection of digital poems in critical discourse. The dataset consists of monographs and Ph.D. dissertations on digital poetry (1995-2015), which have been exported into visualization software. Macro and network analyses enable new debate concerning the outlined problems and new findings. My findings suggest that criticism in this domain is chiefly endogenous and that a limited number of poems is being canonized. Therefore, a meta-discourse perspective can pave the way for an external view of the field, concerning its epistemology and evolution. The dataset is available online for download and can be tested and reconsidered by other researchers. Keywords: electronic literature; digital poetry; network analysis; literature and technology.

Resumo
Este ensaio macro-analisa várias obras teóricas, publicadas na área de poesia digital, que estão documentadas na ELMCIP Knowledge Base. Os problemas aprofundados neste contexto fundamentam-se na autorreferencialidade revelada por autores que são poetas e críticos e na necessidade de uma seleção mais vasta de poemas digitais no discurso crítico. A amostra de dados é composta por monografias e dissertações de doutoramento acerca de poesia digital (1995-2015) e foi exportada para software de visualização. Os métodos macro-analíticos e de teoria de rede permitem um debate renovado em relação aos problemas delineados e, por conseguinte, novos resultados. Os resultados aqui apresentados sugerem que, nesta área, o discurso crítico é majoritariamente endógeno e tem vindo a canonizar um escasso número de poemas. Desta forma, uma perspectiva meta-discursiva poderá favorecer uma visão externa sobre a evolução e epistemologia da poesia digital. A amostra de dados está disponível para transferência em livre acesso de modo a ser testada e reconsiderada por outros investigadores. Palavras-chave: literatura eletrónica; poesia digital; análise de rede; literatura e tecnologia.
Identifying Problems

In one of Ernesto Sábato’s *El Túnel* (1948) digressions, Juan Pablo Castel, the first-person narrator, invokes the analogy between the practice of a doctor and that of a painter to question the fact that an art critic, who has never been an artist, can assess a work of art in a profound manner:

LOS CRÍTICOS. Es una plaga que nunca pude entender. Si yo fuera un gran cirujano y un señor que jamás ha manejado un bisturí, ni es médico ni ha entabillado la pata de un gato, viniera a explicarme los errores de mi operación, ¿qué se pensaría? Lo mismo pasa con la pintura. Lo singular es que la gente no advierte que es lo mismo y aunque se ría de las pretensiones del crítico de cirugía, escucha con un increíble respeto a esos charlatanes. Se podría escuchar con cierto respeto los juicios de un crítico que alguna vez haya pintado, aunque más no fuera que telas mediocre. Pero aun en ese caso sería absurdo, pues ¿cómo puede encontrarse razonable que un pintor mediocre dé consejos a uno bueno? ([1948] 1997: 22)¹

Sábato’s character’s point of view is legitimate but does not acknowledge a more refined and sensible distinction about critical thought and inquiry, which has to do with broader intersection lines, and so it can be read in a reductive manner.

In fact, there is a different mode of knowledge production put forward by artists or writers—practitioners—who themselves are theorists, and by critics who are not practitioners. The same is the case for poets who write about poetry and poetry critics who are not poets. Stephanie Strickland and John Cayley develop a poetic practice and also theorize on their own and others’ works. This practice-based critical view, seen from inside of the writing process, allows them to consider issues that are sustained and, in many cases, arise from questioning and engaging with their own writing program and processes—what Strickland (2006) calls poetics. In American literature, especially following the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E lineage, this means thinking (poetics) through doing (poiesis) and doing through thinking. Thus, poetry assimilates poetics and poetics assimilates poetry. However, critical inquiry

¹ “THE CRITICS. If I were a great surgeon, and some fellow who had never held a scalpel in his hand, who was not a doctor, and who had never so much as put a splint on a cat’s paw, tried to point out where I had gone wrong in my operation, what would people think? It is the same with painting. What is amazing is that people do not realize it is the same, and although they would laugh at the pretensions of the man who criticizes the surgeon, they listen with nauseating respect to the charlatans who comment on art. There might be some excuse for listening to the opinions of a critic who once painted, even if only mediocre works. But that is just as absurd; because what could be reasonable about a mediocre painter giving advice to a good one?” ([1948] 2012: 6-7)
that solely focuses on one’s own creative work can lead to very subjective appreciations, narrowing down criticism and forcibly fall on an apologia of one’s own standards. From a different angle, critics such as Katherine Hayles or Roberto Simanowski hold an external critical view, from the outside of the poetic writing process. This position allows them, perhaps, to be less partial and to try to have a more comprehensive approach, but it can also drive some critics, at moments, to be inflected by over-theorization, that is, paying more attention to the surface than to code, and not reading the inner mechanics of a piece and critically engaging with a practice-based knowledge of what is being reviewed.

Reflecting on the problems of self-referentiality and canonization—by studying a field as a system that can be considered from a macro perspective—I try then to investigate how digital poetic work is being referenced by these two ends of the critical spectrum and what works are being more referenced. These problems originate from an attempt to provide an external or meta-discourse perspective on the field and a concern regarding the need for a wider selection of digital poems in critical discourse.

From Singular and Multi-Documentation to Plural Observation

In order to explore these problems, I have mined data about critical writing on digital poetry documented at the ELMCIP Electronic Literature Knowledge Base (http://elmcip.net). I have extracted a dataset consisting of monographs and Ph.D. dissertations, published between 1995 and 2015, along with their referenced creative works, the majority of which are digital poems. Then, I analyzed those relations by performing network visualizations.

The macroanalytic observation suggests that digital poetry is a domain that has produced a significant corpus of creative works and critical discourse. However, how is critical discourse affecting and selecting the corpus of digital poems? One needs to problematize the difference between practice-based critical writing and critical writing developed by scholars who are not poets, since their frameworks diverge, even though it does not mean that the diversity of case studies is richer. Thus, the two questions I pose are: Is there a prevalence of self-referenced creative works in critical writing? Is there a set of digital poems which is more referenced than others?

ELMCIP is a collaborative and open access knowledge base on electronic literature and one of the most comprehensive databases in the field. Its model allows for users to contribute with new records or edit pre-existing ones. As a database being continuously updated, ELMCIP maps not only the field but also its literary antecedents, both critically and creatively.²

² For further information see the white paper “The ELMCIP Knowledge Base” by Scott Rettberg with Eric Dean Rasmussen (2014).