

# A Short History of Electronic Literature and Communities in the Nordic Countries

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## Abstract

While literary hypertexts and the research field were still in an early stage, Nordic researchers laid their eyes on the literary potential of hypertext technologies. Some Nordic researchers (e.g. Aarseth 1994; Koskimaa 1994; Liestøl 1994), I would claim (perhaps in a moment of patriotism), contributed significantly to a research field still in its infancy. Still, after almost twenty years, it is hard to discover a specifically Nordic community for electronic literature. Those scholars conducting research on electronic literature in the Nordic countries are usually associates of international communities like the Electronic Literature Organization, Digital Fiction International Network and Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice. Similar communities in the Nordic countries are not that easy to spot, but we might say that they exist, although as rather small-scale projects and communities. This does however not imply that they are insignificant. On the contrary, as this article will show, the communities have been important for distributing and archiving electronic literature in the Nordic countries, for making works available to a broad audience, and for improving the conditions for writing electronic literature in a Nordic language.

## Introduction

This article gives a survey of the tradition of electronic literature in the Nordic countries, focusing both on the literature and communities emerging in the field within the last two decades. I have no ambition of covering all the activities that have been going on in the Nordic countries for the last two decades. Much has happened, and it would be impossible and futile to include all in this article. For the record: The Nordic countries include Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Faroe Islands, and Norway. Unfortunately, I know of no electronic literature from Iceland and Faroe

Islands. In Finland the tradition of electronic literature is rich, but unfortunately my knowledge in the Finnish language is weak and I am therefore not able to treat the Finnish tradition with the respect it deserves. The article provides introduction to electronic literature in the Nordic countries, with a particularly attention on electronic literature and communities in Sweden, Denmark and Norway.

## Some Communities

In the early 1990s several Nordic scholars made significant contributions to the research on electronic literature, or what at that point was best known as literary hypertexts. Most important in this context is Espen Aarseth's 1995 doctoral dissertation from the University of Bergen, published as a book in 1997, *Cybertext. Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, where he provides a typology of texts based on their functional qualities. The book is less occupied with the concept "hypertext" in favor of "cybertext", which in a broad sense defines text also by the mean of media as a critical part of electronic literature. Aarseth already called attention to this move away from a media specific understanding of "hypertext" in his article "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory", in George Landow's edited volume *Hyper/Text/Theory* (1994). Aarseth's argument is that hypertext and nonlinearity as a literary technique is not new, but something that occurs in literary texts long before the invention of the computer.

Likewise, the Norwegian scholar Gunnar Liestøl in his article "Wittgenstein, Genette and the Reader's Narrative in Hypertext" (1994), also published in Landow's *Hyper/Text/Theory*, argues against the understanding of hypertext as nonlinear. Liestøl's point is that reading and writing are linear phenomena, and that once a word or a sentence is read, whether or not it has a nonlinear organization, it is removed from its nonlinear context and given a position in a linear chain.

Other critics important to the field include Raine Koskimaa and Markku Eskelinen, or e.g. "second generation" of researchers on hypertext and electronic literature in the Nordic countries, and early (academic) bloggers, Jill Walker Rettberg, Lisbeth Klastrup, and Susanne Tosca. Publications such as "Piecing Together or Tearing Apart: Reading afternoon. a story" (Walker 1999), "The Lyrical Quality of Links" (Tosca 1999), "A Pragmatics of Links" (Tosca 2000), *Digital Literature. From Text to Hypertext and Beyond* (Koskimaa 2000), *CyberText Yearbook* (Eskelinen and Koskimaa 2000- ), "Cybertext Theory and Literary Studies" (Eskelinen 2001), *Fiction and Interaction. How Clicking a House Can Make You Part of a Fictional World* (Walker 2003), and *Towards a Poetics of Virtual Worlds. Multiuser Textuality and the Emergence of Story* (Klastrup 2003) are valuable and much cited contributions to the early research base on electronic literature, and highlight the Nordic

engagement in this research area. This engagement was not least manifested in Dichtung Digital's "Scandinavian special issue" in 2003. The issue was edited by Eskelinen and contained contributions from scholars from Finland (Eskelinen, Teemu Ikonen, Aki Järvinen and Koskimaa), Sweden (Jonas Ingvarsson and Jesper Olson), Denmark (Lisbeth Klastrup), and Norway (Anders Fagerjord, Torill Mortensen, and Ragnhild Tronstad).

The researchers briefly mentioned here are, in an international and Nordic context, academic pioneers whose attention at a relatively early stage in the research on literary hypertexts was caught by digital technology as a means for literary production, distribution and reception. Their early engagement is crucial not least because it made the ground for the development of the electronic literature itself and for electronic literature as a research field in the Nordic countries.

The number of dissertations concerning electronic literature at Nordic universities has for the last years increased, and includes among others Søren Pold's *Ex Libris. Medierealistisk Litteratur. Paris, Los Angeles & Cyberspace* (2004), Anna Gunder's *Hyperworks: On Digital Literature and Computer Games* (2004), Anne Mangen's *New Narrative Pleasures? A Cognitive-Phenomenological Study of the Experience of Reading Digital Narrative Fictions* (2006), Maria Engberg's *Born Digital. Writing Poetry in the Age of New Media* (2007), my own dissertation *Tekstspill i hypertext* ('Textplay in Hypertext', 2008), Giovanna Di Rosario's *Electronic Poetry: Understanding Poetry in the Digital Environment* (2011), Markku Eskelinen's *Cybertext Poetics* (2009)<sup>1</sup>, and Anders Løvlie's *Textopia. Experiments with Locative Literature* (2011).

In addition to these works the *Cybertext Yearbook* series as a publication venue for critical writing should be highlighted here. The yearbook was founded by Koskimaa and Eskelinen in 2000, and has established its position in the field as a well cited peer-review journal. It has among others been defined by *American Book Review* (2002) as "the best cutting-edge reads for the literary digerati". Being a freely accessible online journal it also serves as a database containing articles published in the yearbook.

Despite the fact that Nordic researchers such as Aarseth, Liestøl, and Koskimaa already in the early 1990s were involved with research on electronic literature, there has been little critical writing and attention given to Nordic electronic literature itself. In the past, some publicity has been given to Nordic electronic literature, but these investigations are limited to blogs, a few articles, and debates in newspapers. One example of this is the Swedish journal of literary science, *Tidsskrift för litteraturvetenskap*, which in 1999 and 2009 devoted issues to the question of the relation of literature and new media. Unfortunately, neither of these issues focused on electronic literature in the Nordic countries.

Nevertheless, in the last decade several initiatives have been taken concerning production, distribution, and archiving of electronic literature and art. Most of these initiatives have grown out of individual engagements and non-profit associations, such as the Nordic electronic literature organisation, ELINOR (founded by Jill W. Rettberg, University of Bergen), the Danish literature and art web magazine Afsnit P (2009-2011, edited by Yde Frostholt, Karen Wagner, and Charlotte Hansen), Betalab in Sweden (offline), and the Finnish Nokturno (edited by Marko Niemi). Some work has also been accomplished by established institutions such as Norwegian Broadcasting (NRK) and Production Network for Electronic Art's (PNEK), which had a collaborative project on Digitale fortællinger ('Digital narratives'). The project took place in 2005 and 2006, with financial support from the Arts Council of Norway, and Bergen Electronic Art (BEK) as server-host. The aim of the project was to increase the awareness of electronic literature and art, and to highlight different ways to utilize digital technology in storytelling. During the project 16 digital works (all curated by Per Platou) were launched online. Similar projects have also been running at Danish Radio. Of these, those who have played, and still plays, a part of crucial importance in developing knowledge on electronic literature in the Nordic countries, are particularly Afsnit P and ELINOR.



Fig. 1. Screenshot from the Danish net site and online journal Afsnit P.

Afsnit P is a net site that describes itself as devoted to “literature outside the book” founded in 1999 by the Danish author Christian Yde Frostholt, along with Karen Wagner and Charlotte Hansen. Since 2001 the net site has mainly been run by Yde Frostholt and Wagner. Its name refers to the physical gallery on poetry that existed in Copenhagen from 1994 to 1998. The “P” denotes both poetry and picture and in that sense put forward its engagement in intermedia and multimodal work and the ‘ut pictura poesis’ tradition where the relations between words, pictures and sound are explored. The net site is a gallery and a place for exhibitions and its main function is to publish electronic literature and art work, as well as distribute critical writings about literature and art outside the book. Important Nordic work has been published and exhibited here, such as Ottar Ormstad’s *svevedikt* (‘poetry floating in the air’, 2006), Johannes Heldén’s *Primärdirektivet* (‘The Primedirective’, 2006), Monica Aasprong’s *Soldatmarkedet* (‘Soldiers’ Market’, 2007) and Cia Rinne’s *Archives Zaroum* (2008). After ten years the editorial work on Afsnit P was discontinued, but the net site is still a valuable archive for a lot of electronic works that have been produced in the last decade in and outside of the Nordic countries.

Another project of importance in this context is Electronic literature in the Nordic countries (ELINOR), a network and an organisation that was founded in 2005 by Jill Walker Rettberg, in collaboration with researchers on electronic literature from Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Norway.<sup>2</sup> Except for the first year, when it received founding from the Arts Council in Norway and Nordic Literature and Library committee, it has not been funded. Consequently, this lack of financial support has lead to low activity in the last few years.



Fig. 2. Screenshot of ELINOR, a Nordic net site and an organization devoted to electronic literature in the Nordic countries.

The purpose of ELINOR was to heighten the attention on electronic literature in general and in particular electronic work written in the Nordic countries, to preserve and archive electronic literature, and to publish and make this literature more accessible. A further goal was to inspire new media writers and stimulate the production of electronic literature. The project's activities lasted for a year from 2005 to 2006, the archive was launched in November 2006. During that period ELINOR collected and presented sixty-four works of electronic literature (27 Finnish, 19 Danish, 12 Norwegian and 6 Swedish). Jill Walker Rettberg, as the project manager, did a job of crucial importance in arranging workshops and readings of electronic literature. The seminar "Electronic literature in the Nordic Countries" was arranged at the University of Bergen in November 10-12, 2004, where the new media writers Morten Skogly, Anne Bang-Steinsvik, both Norwegian artists, and Scott Rettberg presented their works.

ELINOR's archive is the first and so far only one exclusively oriented towards electronic literature in the Nordic countries. Still, the list of works on ELINOR's net site is not complete. The reason for this is among others the lack of funding for keeping the net site up-dated. The production of electronic literature in the Nordic countries also seems to be in need of stimulation and financial support from other established institutions such as libraries and broadcasting companies. When e.g. NRK and PNEK in 2005-2006 did their project on digital narratives, they stimulated to the production of twenty Norwegian electronic works. The number of works produced that year is in a Nordic context high, and later years and projects can in no way compete with the number of electronic literature produced in relation to the mentioned NRK/PNEK collaborative project. Today ELINOR first and foremost serves as an archive on Nordic electronic literature, and as a place where schools, libraries and others can find information about electronic literature.

## Early Hypertext Fiction

The tradition of electronic literature in the Nordic countries is more or less as old as the international tradition. If we regard Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story* (1987) as a starting point in an international perspective, the birth of Nordic electronic literature equally took place in the late 1980s. In what follows I will pay attention to four works that have been of importance for the development of electronic literature and communities in the Nordic countries.

The Swedish author and avant-garde artist Karl-Erik Tallmo is one of the earliest authors in the Nordic countries who produced literature written not only on, but also for, a digital computer. Already in 1988 he wrote a hypertext in Hypercard called *Hamnen* ('The Harbor'), where 52 text fragments statements are combined in a

network structure. Two years later he used Hypercard to produce a text or dictionary on writing, *Skriv rätt* ('Write correctly'), and in 1992 he produced what probably is the first hypertext fiction in Sweden, *lakttagarens förmåga att ingripa* ('The watcher's ability to interfere'). Hamnen can be downloaded from Tallmo's own net site or from ELINOR. *Skriv rätt* is unfortunately no longer available, while *lakttagarens förmåga att ingripa* is distributed on a disc or as an electronic file, which is made available by contacting the author and paying a small fee. But it only runs on a Mac, and then a Mac with the necessary operating system. As far as I have experienced it runs on OS 7 with Hypercard or Hypercard player.

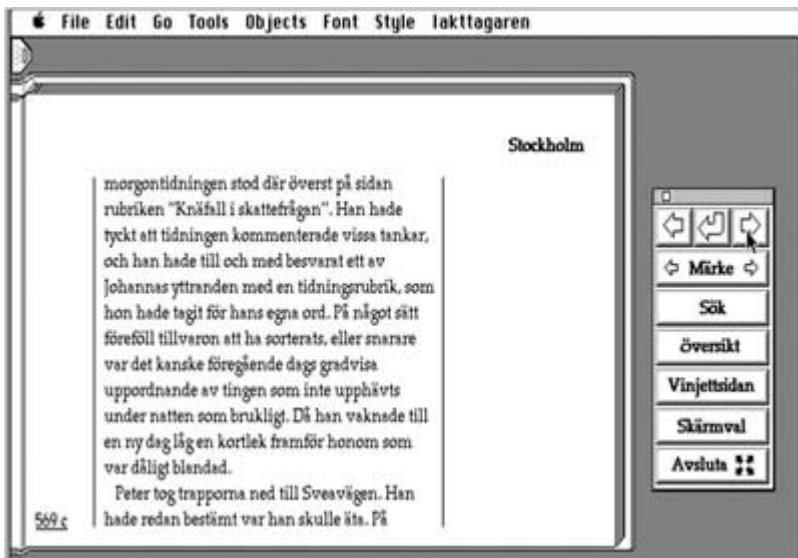


Fig. 3. Screenshot from the Swedish hypertext fiction *lakttagarens förmåga att ingripa* (1992), by Karl-Erik Tallmo.

*lakttagarens förmåga att ingripa* contains mostly written text, but some pictures and sounds also appear. In that case this text also in an international context is an early example of multimodal hypertext fiction: You traverse the text by clicking on links, which will provide you with a new text cluster, just like reading *afternoon* or *Patchwork Girl*. You read the text by using the navigation menu at the right hand side of the screen. Clicking on links might also cause a small text box to appear in front of the main text cluster, or as a kind of a note on the side of the text. These side notes are sometimes narrative and diegetic, sometimes they look more like a poem, and sometimes they are explanations given by the narrator. Other links again makes more text appear inside the original text. This text appears as animated text that is temporally manipulated, so the clicking gives the reader an impression that

he is just reading half of a sentence, and need to click to make the rest of the sentence appear. Occasionally the reader is asked to “flip” a virtual coin, and the narrative continues based on the result, unintentionally and randomly.

The work *lakttagarens förmåga att ingripa* is a hypertext fiction discussing fatalism as a philosophical view on life. The story is about an author named Pete, who experiences the lack of options to change the course of his life. During a stay in New York he meets by accident the photographer Johanna. Johanna is on leave from a psychiatric hospital, and Pete gets a relationship with her, more or less against his own will. Back in Stockholm they move in together, and as they get to know each other they start to discover unknown sides of themselves.

The plot is structured like a crime novel, where the author has left traces for the bright reader to discover, and where the ending is unexpected. The title *lakttagarens förmåga att ingripa* refers just as much to the reader's situation in hypertext as to the plot and the characters' circumstances. Even though the reader is given choices and apparently is able to control the narrative sequence, the macro sequence and the narrative end are fixed and predetermined. Just like *afternoon* and *Patchwork girl*, Tallmo's hypertext fiction situates itself in the discussion of the hypertext technology's democratic potential and the reader's freedom of choices in hypertext. In this sense *lakttagarens förmåga att ingripa* contributed to the discussions of newer technological affordances and its impact on the processes of writing and reading, and on concepts such as literature, narratives, text, etc., in a Nordic context.

In some Nordic digital work there are obvious connections with literary experimentation on computers, which can be traced back to the multimedia avant-garde. The neo-avant-garde's impact on the e-lit tradition in the Nordic countries can be seen in Tallmo's work, just as we find it in other early examples of electronic literature. Another example of this relation is the Norwegian author Tor Åge Bringsværd and the digital text *Faen*. Nå har de senket takhøyden igjen. Må huske å kjøpe nye knebeskyttere ('Damn. They lowered tolerance levels again. Have to remember to buy new kneepads', my translation).



Fig. 4. Screenshot[4] from the Norwegian author Tor Åge Bringsværd's *Faen*. Nå har de senket takhøyden igjen. Må huske å kjøpe nye knebeskyttere.



Originally Bringsværd wrote the text as a print text in 1971, in a collection called *Sesam 71* (1971), where it appeared as an interactive short novel where the lexias are hypertextually organised. Inspired by literary experimentations from the 1960s, like Raymond Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* and Marc Saportas' *Composition No. 1*, Bringsværd's print hypertext plays with literary forms and literature's flexibility. It is unbound and unpaginated, and there exists no template or table of content that reveals an original sequence.

The work has been remediated in digital media a couple of times. In the early 1990s it was digitalised in HTML by Trygve Lillefosse, and a second remediation was done in 1999 by the digital artist Marius Watz. Through the remediation Bringsværd's hypertext represents an early link between print and digital texts that experiments with other principles than the linear, and foregrounds a multilinear text structure and an associative reading. Both in print and as digital hypertext it is an early example of a Norwegian literary hypertext.

Both the Swedish text by Tallmo and the Norwegian text by Bringsværd put forward an associative mode of reading. They then seem to follow Vannevar Bush's cognitive model in his essay "As we may think" (1945), where he argues that our minds do not work in linear sequences but by associational trails. At the same time there is as I mentioned an obvious relation between the avant-garde and these early hypertext fictions. Today similar connections can be made with literary experimentations on paper and screen by works of new media writers such as from Norway Morten Skogly, Monica Aasprong, Marte Aas, Marte Huke, Ottar Ormstad, Tale Næss, from Sweden Johannes Heldén, Cia Rinne (a Swedish-Finnish artist), and from Denmark Peter Adolphsen, and Christian Yde Frostholm.

## Multimodal Digital Literature

As we enter into the second half of the 1990s digital fiction in the Nordic countries becomes more and more multimodal. It contains not only verbal text, but also pictures, music, movie clips and so on. And it no longer borrows its shape from print literature. This phase, which N. Katherine Hayles calls the second generation, or contemporary or postmodern electronic literature, is actually quite rich in the Nordic countries. Because of its drives to make use of pictures and sounds along with written and oral language, this category, whether historical or descriptive, could also be named multimodal electronic literature.

One example of a multimodal work is Tale Næss and Erle Stenberg's *Lys/Mørke* ('Light/Darkness', my translation), from 2006, which is a remediation of a play with the same title. Moving the work into a digital environment Næss makes use of

written and verbal text, pictures, graphics, and animations to create a quite different work than the original. She also explained in an interview that the play not really was meant for the stage, but that she was waiting for its right medium. So she utilises facilities of the medium to make the text appear as she first envisioned it.<sup>3</sup>



Fig. 5. Screenshot from the Norwegian work *Lys/Mørke* (2006), by Tale Næss and Erle Stenberg.

The work is interactive in the sense that the reader needs to move the mouse cursor over the screen to make something happen. The narrative is divided into three different and independent stories, and which of the three stories that appear, depends on where on the screen the reader holds his mouse cursor.

One of the narratives is about a fire in a train coupe. Two persons die in the fire, probably kids, and the narrator is probable the father telling us how he remembers the fire. Another of the narratives is about a group of people trekking in the mountains, when suddenly one of the group members disappears. The dead body of the person is not found until the snow starts to melt. And the third narrative is about a father taking his two sons on a fishing trip, when one of his sons discovers what might be a dead body. It is hard to tell actually. In the play, which is published in a book, the text explicitly mentions a dead body that one of the sons finds in the water. In the digital version, we can only hear the son telling his father: "There is something in the water". This part of the narrative actually ends with laughter, so it is hard to tell what actually happened.

The work is about losing someone and/or finding someone, and it demonstrates the big semiotic leap that the work takes from the theatre stage to the digital screen, from a play to a kind of digital narrative. It shows how other semiotic systems can

be used to tell the same story, and how the technology can be used to make different scenes, different incidents, collide, because they can be combined and read in different sequences and contexts.

Another example from the Nordic multimodal tradition is Langweekend ('Long Weekend') by Beate C. Rønning, a bilingual work in Norwegian and English. The work was published in 2006 as a part of the NRK/PNEK project Digitale fortellinger. It represents a fragmented memory of a bank holiday weekend spent in a city. And the work displays typical incidents from places associated with spending a weekend in a city, such as inside the plain, inside a taxi, at cafés, and at the hotel.



Fig. 6. Screenshot from the Norwegian work Langweekend (2006), by Beate C. Rønning.

Again, there is a combination of photos, written language, music, speech, and other sound elements. These different semiotic resources work together in what Roland Barthes would call “relay”. Barthes writes that in this kind of relationship “text (most often a snatch of dialogue) and image stand in a complementary relationship”. In Langweekend ('Long Weekend') the different semiotic resources tell us different stories, or give us different information about the place and the surroundings. The picture and the sounds combined generate the feeling of closeness to what is represented, and to create a kind of immediacy. An interesting thing about this work is that in contrast to many other electronic works, the feeling of immediacy is carried mostly by the sounds. When we see the picture from the plain it is the sound of the captain speaking that catches our attention the most. And in the café, the noise from the café guests, sounds of footsteps etc. make the simulation of a café

somewhat stronger. It is (almost) as if we're inside an airplane or at a café. But as we get the feeling of being inside an airplane or at a café, words and sentences start to appear on the screen, subverting the sense of immediacy. We are somewhat transported from immediacy and transparency to hypermediacy and reflectivity. The sentences do not create a coherent text, but are for instance in the café fragments from different conversations taking place at other tables. And these fragments underline how the work is caused by small pieces of memory from different places, distributed through different media, and represented in different modes.

## Nordic Cybertexts

The Nordic tradition of electronic literature is relatively rich in multimodal works. In some of these works, the multimodal aesthetic is combined with computer algorithms. This is for instance the case for the Danish work *Ingen elge på vejen den dag* ('No Moose on the Road That Day', 2001; my translation) and the Norwegian work *Hva sier træerne* ('What are the trees saying?' 2006). In that sense we could also talk about a third generation of Nordic electronic literature. In addition to Hayles' two categories or generations of electronic literature, the classic and the postmodern or multimodal, Astrid Ensslin (2007) has proposed a third category, which she, based on Espen Aarseth's (1997) concept, calls cybertext literature. One example of this generation in the Nordic countries is the Danish *Ingen elge på vejen den dag* ('No Moose on the Road That Day') by Sonja Thomsen.



Fig. 7. Screenshot from the Danish work *Ingen elge på vejen den dag* (2001), by Sonja Thomsen.

Ingen elge på vejen den dag ('No Moose on the Road That Day') is not conceived as a work driven by the reader's desire to solve a central mystery, which is the case in Tallmo's work. There are mysteries here, but not ones that can be solved. This is a computer-generated text, in which the reader has no control of the lexias that are available. The work is also temporally manipulated in the sense that the content, and in some cases the plot, changes according to which day the text is read. It looks different today than it did yesterday. And if we retrieve it tomorrow, it would be different again. In other words, the reader is not in the position of manipulating the text. The only thing he is in control of is when to read the work. And to explore the work and to be able to grasp all the lexias, and all the combinations of texts, pictures, graphics, and sounds, the reader has to revisit it every day for several weeks. The reader has to engage in the text in several ways, make some kind of commitment to the text, and more or less sign an imaginative ethic contract with the text where he obligates himself to make regular (daily) visits. The work encourages the reader to experience it as a continuous stream of texts, music, images, representing the character's thoughts and events that melt into one another. To fully experience the work, the reader has to take time and not rush. The goal though is not to reach the end (because there is none), but rather to experience the journey itself.

The reading in other words is a journey without an end. There are almost always new text clusters, or text clusters recontextualised in new combinations. In that sense the reader might feel trapped, just as the characters in the narrative are to some extent and in a way trapped. The text tells about four characters, what they think and how they interact. They are two couples, but at some point in our reading we discover that they are not that close friends. Secrets are being revealed. One of the characters is depressed, and is in need of medicine to keep him mentally stabile.

The work evokes a tense atmosphere. In one of the text clusters we can read a poem, which is sometimes accompanied by an intense sound:

En glemt flue summer rundt i rummet, støder mot  
glasruten igjen og igjen. Oppe i loftet, langt inde i et  
hjørne, sidder edderkoppen og venter. Den behøver ikke  
gøre noget, endnu.

A forgotten fly sums around in the room, hits against  
the window again and again. Up in the ceiling, in a  
corner, sits a spider waiting. It does not  
have to do anything, yet. (My translation)

Ingen elge på vejen den dag ('No Moose on the Road That Day') combines different semiotic resources and traditional art discipline like literature, photography, drawing, music and drama. It then is an example of how Nordic electronic literature is part of a tradition that blurs the categories between the arts. It is also a collaborative work. Two young Danish authors have written the text, a photographer

has provided the pictures, and a sound artist created the music and sound elements.

Hva sier trærne ('What are the trees saying?' Or perhaps in a more Shakespearean way: What say the trees?, my translation) is a poetic artwork by the artist Marte Aas. It consists of written poems as well as facts about trees, a graphic cross section of a tree, where the growth rings are clickable and marked in different colors. Further it contains some sound clips from a radio program about trees, and the reader can also hear the quiet sound of the branches and leafs as the wind blows on them. The text is also connected to a web camera, which shows live pictures of a tree. The Norwegian poet Marte Huke has written the text that constitutes the database that provides or feeds the cybertext poem, and she has also written the static poems that appear when the reader clicks on one of the color marked growth rings. The work is based on an old folkloristic idea that trees can talk, and explores this through recognizable semiotic systems. In that sense, the poems should be received as "translations" of the trees' talk.



Fig. 8. Screenshot from the Norwegian work Hva sier trærne? (2006) by Marte Aas.

The work was launched in 2005 and was live for a year. Once a month a new poem for the cross section was added – like a poem of the month. The webcam was online the whole time so the reader could follow the tree day and night all four seasons. Today the work is online, but the webcam is down and replaced by a movie clip which goes in loops, and the sound from the tree is not working any more.

## The State of Electronic Literature and Communities

After two decades Nordic electronic literature is still yet to flourish as a literary tradition. Roughly there exist some one hundred Nordic works of e-lit. Electronic literature as an academic field is established with research projects and Ph.D. students writing their thesis on electronic literature, but few of these research projects involves Nordic works. In that sense, does this mean that there exists a Nordic community of electronic literature? The answer would of course depend on what we mean by community, and what it is that defines a community to be a community. It might be that these Nordic communities are only imagined (Benedict Anderson speaks of “imagined communities”), but it seems fair to argue that they are “real”, at least as pragmatically and contextually constructed communities. For the moment we might say that a community is established, with Scott Rettberg and University of Bergen’s Electronic Literature Research Group as its center and driving force, with international, rather than national, electronic literature at the center of its attention.

After two decades it is too early and too few literary works to conclude about any particular aesthetic tendency on behalf of the Nordic tradition. One thing though could be singled out: I would claim that electronic literary works in the Nordic countries seem to be more oriented towards aesthetic intermedia tendencies and traditions rather than reflection on technological development and changes in the media situation, and the technology’s impact on our knowledge and perception of literature and the arts. Following Astrid Ensslin’s (2007) suggestion to extend the generations of electronic literature from two to three, we could say that the first generation, the literary hypertexts, and the third generation, the cybertext generation, in the Nordic countries are poor, while most of the Nordic works would be defined as multimodal and fully multimedia works.

To say that few of these works are paying less or no attention to the digital media is of course an unnuanced conclusion. Johannes Heldén’s *Primärdirektivet* (‘The Prime Directive’, 2006) and *Entropi* (‘Entropy’, 2010), or Torbjørn Skårild’s *Rush* (2006) could be read as works that reflect a changing media situation.<sup>4</sup> Still, the majority of Nordic works seem to be concerned with the combination of different art forms more than they are media-reflective works. Even though some of the works could be characterized as media experimentations, they are also artistic exploration of the relation between literature and digital technology, as well as they are literary and conceptual experimentations. This is an observation also made by the Norwegian artist Marte Aas, the creator of the work *Hva sier trærne?*. She explained in an interview<sup>5</sup> that I made with her that one of the things that she wanted to achieve with *Hva sier trærne?* was a work that gave an aesthetic experience, a sense experience, and not a work intended to be considered and received as media experimentation, that is, experimentation with new media’s affordances.

In the Nordic countries electronic literature is taught in institutions such as University of Bergen, Norway (Jill Walker Rettberg, Scott Rettberg, Eric Rasmussen, and Patricia Tomaszek), University of Jyväskylä, Finland (Raine Koskimaa, Markku Eskelinen, and Giovanna Di Rosario), Blekinge Institute of Technology, Sweden (Jay David Bolter, Maria Engberg, Talan Memmott, and Lissa Holloway-Attaway, and Gösta Viberg), University of Aarhus, Denmark (Søren Pold and Mette-Marie Zacher Sørensen), University of Umeå, Sweden (Cecilie Lindhé and James Barrett), and Hedmark University College, Norway (Hans K. Rustad). Still scholars more in general are only beginning to address the challenge electronic literature has for our understanding of literature, knowledge about research methods, and pedagogical approaches. Here as elsewhere the challenge lies in teaching students about multimodal text practices, teaching how to write and interpret texts in a digital culture, and not least to demonstrate the value of electronic literature for the development of digital literacy. Afsnit P and ELINOR have in this sense an important role in making the Nordic works easily accessible. Most of the works are as mentioned retrievable on these websites, without charge. But a few works exist only on CD or floppy disc, and yet a handful is only available for downloading, by contacting the author individually and paying a small fee.

In this respect we are at risk of losing important works of electronic literature. For instance Tallmo's works are not archived by any public library or interest organisation, and are only accessible by contacting the author himself. The consequence of this is as mentioned that his hypertext, *Skriv rätt* ('Write correctly'), is no longer available. A rather different but still fragile situation applies to the Danish author Michael Valeur's works, *Blackout* (1997) and *Englen* ('The Angel', 1999). These are in a somewhat unique situation. Not only have they reached through an important institutional border by actually being among those few that are archived at the Royal Library of Denmark, they also gained status as classics. As interactive movies, and through their similarities with computer games, they have just crossed the threshold of the Danish canon, and are valued as two of the most important digital works published in Denmark. However it is doubtful that the status as classics will change their destiny. Chances of being republished are slim, meaning that they are still hard to pursue.

What characterizes the situation of electronic literature in the Nordic countries is broad and fluid modes of distribution, along with too accidental a practice and lack of standards of how to archive and describe electronic literature. Here Afsnit P and ELINOR, as well as newer projects such as ELMCIP play a crucial part in building up databases where researchers, teachers, students, librarians, and others can be pursued by Nordic electronic literature.



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## Notes

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1. Published by Continuum in 2012.
2. Jill Walker Rettberg was the head of the project, and shared the initiative with Lisbeth Klastrup, Susana Tosca, Raine Koskimaa, Patrick Svensson, Søren Pold and Thomas Breivik. Texts for the presentation of electronic literature on the ELINOR site were written by Marko Niemi, Karen Wagner, Maria Engberg, and Hans K. Rustad.
3. The interview was conducted by the Norwegian prodcasting department Ulyd and is available at [http://www.pnek.org/DigiFor/DIG8\\_Lys.html](http://www.pnek.org/DigiFor/DIG8_Lys.html)
4. See for instance Maria Engberg's (2010) short interpretation of Heldén's Primærdirektivet in the Electronic Literature Directory: <http://directory.eliterature.org/node/398>
5. The interview was conducted in May 2010 in relation to a work about quality in new media production, which is not yet published.