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Title	Irish digital literature
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Publication date	2023-01-19
Original Citation	O'Sullivan, J. (2023) 'Irish digital literature', in Kelleher, M. and O'Sullivan, J. (eds.) Technology in Irish Literature and Culture. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 308-326. doi: 10.1017/9781009182881.020
Type of publication	Book chapter
Link to publisher's version	https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009182881.020 - 10.1017/9781009182881.020
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Download date	2026-11-07 09:02:32
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/14219



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CHAPTER 18

Irish Digital Literature

James O'Sullivan

In the summer of 2018, a curious picture appeared on Twitter streams. Irish writer Doireann Ní Ghríofa was standing ankle-deep in Cork's River Lee, a photographer crouched at her feet. Ní Ghríofa was in situ to record a video that would showcase a new project with The Salvage Press, a Dublin-based publishing house run by artist and designer Jamie Murphy. The hallmark of Salvage is their letterpress-printed books, a fading craft kept alive through Murphy's commitment to the process of setting type by hand. The picture and its context are striking because they pose an apt summation of Ní Ghríofa's literary career to date: the river and the camera, the natural and the mechanical.[1] That image from 2018 reveals something intriguing about her process and perspective. It speaks, in a way, to Ní Ghríofa's fascination with *technê*: the tweet did not feature a final, press-ready still or clip from the video, but rather the work-in-progress, an image of an image being made.

Ní Ghríofa's work with Salvage, a collaboration with Irish artist Alice Maher entitled *Nine Silences*, is steeped in technique – literary, visual, material. It is as multimodal as can be achieved with print, a consequence of its synergistic origins. It is striking, almost refreshing, to see how Salvage Press has foregrounded the role of collaboration in cultural production. The project's Web presence[2] accounts for every artisan who had a part in the textual and paratextual aspects of the piece: Ní Ghríofa's words are offered in response to Maher's artwork, while its design and printing are attributed to Jamie Murphy, with assistance from Sarah O'Neill, Lorcan

[1] Having come to writing in her late twenties, Ní Ghríofa has established herself as one of contemporary Irish literature's eminent figures. She has received such accolades as the Ireland Chair of Poetry Bursary Award, a Seamus Heaney Centre fellowship at Queen's University Belfast, the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature, and a Lannan Literary Fellowship for Poetry. Her novel-length prose debut, *A Ghost in the Throat* (2020), won An Post Irish Book of the Year, Foyles Non-fiction Book of the Year, and Hodges Figgis Irish Book of the Year.

[2] The aforementioned promotional video and the production information on *Nine Silences* can be found on the Salvage website: thesalvagepress.com/nine-silences-deluxe (accessed 16 June 2022).

Rush, and Lauren Shannon O'Brien of the Distiller's Press at the National College of Art and Design. Adrian Frutiger is recognised for designing, in 1954, the Méridien typeface that was set atop '150gsm Hodgkinson hand-made paper produced for the Stanbrook Abbey Press in 1974 and kept dry until now by John Purcell in London'. Jemma Lewis used Irish Carrageen Moss to prepare the marbling, and Tom, Pat, Tommy, and Patricia Duffy bound *Nine Silences* at their workshop in the Five Lamps, Dublin. Such explicit detail shows an appreciation for what can be achieved through collaboration; it is, like the image of an image being made, a text about a text being made.

Collaboration has an uneasy relationship with the Irish sense of what literature should be – a singular voice using a singular medium to tell a singular story or related set of stories. This aversion to collaboration is partly responsible for the lack of digital literature being produced on this island. Typically, the term 'digital literature' refers to 'a first-generation digital object created on a computer and (usually) meant to be read on a computer'.[3] Digital literature is entirely different to literature which has been digitised, which is, aesthetically, really quite close to print. As Serge Bouchardon explains:

> If an e-reader simply displays text in the way a printed book displays text – the only difference being that to advance the text one scrolls rather than turns a page – this is not 'digital literature.' It is printed work digitized for optimal display in a portable computational environment. Digital literature is algorithmic. It changes as the reader engages it.[4]

Certainly, it would be dangerously prescriptive to say that print cannot have a part in digital literature, but for any act of expression to be truly *digital* in the way it is meant here, 'computation should constitute some inherent component of the piece's aesthetics'.[5] If the text on a screen could be readily transferred to print and nothing of significance to the essence of the piece were lost in that transfer, then it is difficult to see how said text might be considered to be *inherently* digital, to be *born* digital.

[3] N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), p. 3.

[4] Serge Bouchardon, 'Towards a Tension-Based Definition of Digital Literature', *Journal of Creative Writing Studies* 2:1 (2016), 3, http://scholarworks.rit.edu/jcws/vol2/iss1/6/ (accessed 16 June 2022).

[5] Davin Heckman and James O'Sullivan, 'Electronic Literature: Contexts and Poetics', in *Literary Studies in the Digital Age*, ed. Kenneth M. Price and Ray Siemens (New York: Modern Language Association, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1632/lsda.2018.14 (accessed 16 June 2022).

Writing elsewhere about digital literature in Ireland (or what is more commonly referred to in academic circles as 'electronic' literature),[6] I note how it is striking that relatively few authors have experimented with computers.[7] My suspicion is that such a dearth is attributable to two factors: networks of practice play an essential role in Irish cultural production, and print literature remains the priority for individuals and institutions in control of our national literatures. The latter is not as damning as it might sound. There is an abundance of contemporary works of digital literature – or literary games,[8] as they might be described – that demonstrate the incredible narrative affordances of digital storytelling: *Dear Esther*, *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, *All the Delicate Duplicates*, *The Stanley Parable*, and *Gone Home*. Digital literature shows much promise, but until a cohort of practitioners capable of consistently achieving the richness which print has given us starts to mature, the older form deserves to retain its place of privilege.

But a modicum of support for the digital would be a start. In 2018, when *novelling*, published by the now defunct New Binary Press,[9] won the prestigious Coover Award for works of digital literature, an annual prize given by the international Electronic Literature Organization, the achievement was not acknowledged by any of the state-funded bodies in Ireland tasked with the promotion of literature. A small, fledgling independent press in Ireland had published a piece of digital literature that claimed one of the world's major international prizes, and the occasion did not even warrant a congratulatory tweet. It would be unwarranted to overtly fault anyone for valuing print literature over digital literature. Artists, writers, and cultural organisations are right to be suspicious of the digital, particularly when conversations surrounding emerging technologies are often hijacked by suspect, typically politically motivated discourses that superficially push 'innovation' and 'digital creativity'.[10] But to almost completely

[6] For a comprehensive examination of electronic literature in a broader context, see Hayles, *Electronic Literature*, and Scott Rettberg, *Electronic Literature* (Cambridge and Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2019).

[7] James O'Sullivan, 'Electronic Literature in Ireland', *Electronic Book Review*, 2018, https://doi.org/10.7273/5mgv-mc25 (accessed 16 June 2022).

[8] See Astrid Ensslin, *Literary Gaming* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014).

[9] I should note, for transparency, that I was the Founding Editor of New Binary Press. For further reflections on my efforts to publish digital literature, see James O'Sullivan, 'Publishing Electronic Literature', in *Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities: Contexts, Forms, and Practices*, ed. Dene Grigar and James O'Sullivan (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), pp. 255–66.

[10] Anne Karhio, 'Between Aesthetics and Institutions: Irish Electronic Poetry', in *Digital Art in Ireland: New Media and Irish Artistic Practice*, ed. James O'Sullivan (London and New York: Anthem Press, 2021), pp. 29–51; Trish Morgan, 'Sharing, Hacking, Helping: Towards an Understanding of Digital Aesthetics through a Survey of Digital Art Practices in Ireland', *Journal*

ignore an emerging art form, an art form that might be construed as one of the most popular, is also problematic:[11] state agencies have a responsibility to support and amplify *all* literatures. And it would seem that the same marginalisation occurs throughout Europe, where digital literature tends to exist outside the mainstream.[12]

The absence of creative networks is a more pressing matter, as like all literatures, it is at the grassroots that Irish digital literature will find its start. The sociology of artistic community has been thoroughly theorised, but, even trivially, it is very easy to see the influence that communities of practice have within Irish literature by simply turning to the acknowledgements in any recent print publication; evidence of those individuals, editors, and publishers who have supported authors on their way to establishment is readily encountered, as the same names often feature repeatedly. In community gatherings like Ó Bhéal and in the many festivals, workshops, launches, and competitions run by the Munster Literature Centre, one can see, quite plainly, just how literary spaces encourage literary production.[13] Such communities operate as vital spaces in which writers can be inspired, gain feedback, and learn and improve their craft. Some exceptions aside – such as the Museum of Literature Ireland (MoLI), the Ó Bhéal International Poetry-Film Competition, SoundEye,[14] and the Irish Electronic Literature Community – Irish writers looking to avail themselves of the digital have very few sites wherein they can consistently gain encouragement and support and refine their process. It should be noted and commended that the state does make contributions to some of the arts and community organisations accommodating digital writing, but this is a consequence of the people sustaining such endeavours

of Media Practice 14:2 (2013), 147–60, https://doi.org/10.1386/jmpr.14.2.147_1 (accessed 16 June 2022).

[11] I make this argument in the following short essays: James O'Sullivan, 'Electronic Literature's Contemporary Moment: Breeze and Campbell's "All the Delicate Duplicates"', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 7 November 2017; and James O'Sullivan, 'Good Literature Can Come in Digital Forms: Just Look to the World of Video Games', *The Conversation*, 5 December 2019.

[12] Markku Eskelinen, Raine Koskimaa, and Giovanna Di Rosario, 'Electronic Literature Publishing and Distribution in Europe', in *Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice: A Report from the HERA Joint Research Project*, ed. Scott Rettberg and Sandy Baldwin (Morgantown: ELMCIP and Center for Literary Computing, West Virginia University Press, 2014), p. 235, https://elmcip.net/sites/default/files/media/critical_writing/attachments/rettberg_baldwin_elmcip.pdf (accessed 16 June 2022).

[13] I hope that readers do not think this regional bias, but living in Cork city, these are the events that spring to mind.

[14] Trevor Joyce, Introduction to 'Soundeye 12: Festival of the Arts of the Word, 3–6 July 2008, Cork, Ireland', ed. James Cummins, Fergal Gaynor, and Trevor Joyce, *Poetry Salzburg Review* 15 (2009), 82–4.

rather than any public policy. Substantial, strategic investment is needed if we are to develop robust networks of practice for Irish digital literature.

That such networks and spaces are a rarity for digital literature is particularly damaging because this literature is often, by necessity, collaborative. Like the pages of *Nine Silences*, works of digital literature often rely on authors gaining access to practitioners capable of contributing the technical aspects of the envisaged piece. This can be seen from the international canon, wherein many of the most notable pieces have been collaboratively produced (though it is notable that they are often represented as the brainchild of a sole authorial figure or pair). Digital literature, certainly, when at the scale of the aforementioned exemplars, can rarely be produced by a sole author, and it is in such pragmatics that we find the major barrier to the form's further development: collaboration is not the norm in literary writing, and collaboration cannot thrive without networks of practice. And so, the situation in which Irish digital literature finds itself is one of stagnation.

Contrast this with what is being achieved internationally. Over in neighbouring Great Britain, studios like The Chinese Room are producing critically and commercially successful walking simulators, like *Dear Esther* and *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*.[15] Walking simulators are a new genre that privilege experiential exploration and narrative over objective-driven play. The genre is comprised of titles which present fully fledged immersive virtual worlds in the fashion of most video games, but these worlds are structured entirely in the service of story – artistic expression rather than challenges and tasks.[16] In *Dear Esther*, the reader/player inhabits a virtual impression of a Hebridean island wherein they are presented with a series of letters as they move from one side of the landscape to the other.[17] *Dear Esther* is essentially an epistolary narrative set in a video game-esque world,

[15] Readers who are completely unfamiliar with these works and who would like a better sense of how they 'look and feel' will be very well served by some of the various walkthroughs that can be found on YouTube. Even better, download both titles from Steam. See https://store.steampowered.com (accessed 18 June 2021).

[16] Melissa Kagen's work is essential reading for anyone interested in learning more about walking simulators. See Melissa Kagen, 'Walking Sims, #GamerGate, and the Gender of Wandering', in *The Year's Work in Nerds, Wonks, and Neocons*, ed. Jonathan P. Eburne and Benjamin Schreier (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), pp. 249–74; Melissa Kagen, 'Walking, Talking and Playing with Masculinities in Firewatch', *Game Studies* 18:2 (2018), http://gamestudies.org/1802/articles/kagen (accessed 18 June 2021).

[17] For a more in-depth treatment of *Dear Esther*, see James O'Sullivan, *Towards a Digital Poetics: Electronic Literature & Literary Games* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 85–92; or, alternatively, James O'Sullivan, '"The Dream of an Island": *Dear Esther* and the Digital Sublime', ed. Astrid Ensslin, Pawel Frelik, and Lisa Swanstrom, *Paradoxa* 29 (2017), 313–26.

with much of the story revealed through the textual fragments read by the game's narrator. It is literature, but it also affords of the immersive aesthetic possibilities of the digital. *Dear Esther* does not simply display text on a web page, static and completely indifferent to how it might appear on paper; it does not use digital tools and platforms to achieve some gimmicked textual behaviour. It is an exemplary piece of digital fiction in that these two elements are intrinsically subsumed: the text tells the story, while the rich, immersive virtual world in which this text is set completely alters the literary experience to something that would not be possible in print. Irish digital literature has not yet made its *Dear Esther*.

The scene in Ireland is not entirely bleak. Dundalk's Michael J. Maguire is considered a pioneer within the international community of 'e-lit' scholars and practitioners, programming his first text adventure, *Lost in Coolock*, back in 1983.[18] Maguire's artistic career began on the stage under the tutelage of Tomás Mac Anna, three-term Artistic Director of the Abbey Theatre. Maguire founded the Travelling Hibernian Ensemble, and, in the early 1990s, produced a multimedia show, *Ham-Let Loose*. Maguire later founded Táintech Creative Studios and secured publishing agreements with major video-game developers, but, starved of funding, was unable to bring any projects to fruition.[19] Táintech closed its doors in January 2000, and Maguire shifted his attention to promoting, studying, and teaching digital literature in Ireland, while also developing his own individual practice.

The River Poem by Jeneen Naji,[20] Pauric Freeman, and Mark Linnane, a collaboration with Maynooth University's Building City Dashboards project, casts text generated by a GPT-2 machine learning algorithm, trained using *Finnegans Wake*, onto a 3D-printed model of Dublin.[21] *The River Poem* represents the ideal of hybridity, merging the algorithmic with the recovered as remixed; the digital with the material; the opacity of hidden, complex computational procedures with the reassuring certainty of architecture and a familiar landscape. It is noteworthy that *The River Poem* trains its model using Joyce, as he has proven to be a particularly popular source for digital literature and new media adaptations.[22] In this sense, *The River Poem* illustrates how long-established themes can find new

[18] O'Sullivan, 'Electronic Literature in Ireland'. [19] Ibid.

[20] Naji also created *The Rubayaat*. See Karhio, 'Between Aesthetics and Institutions', pp. 43–4.

[21] See https://web.archive.org/web/20210516140859/jeneeninteractive.com/?p=373 (accessed 4 July 2022).

[22] Kenneth Keating, '"to Shine upon the Original All the More Fully": Contemporary New Media Adaptations of James Joyce', in *Digital Art in Ireland: New Media and Irish Artistic Practice*, ed. James O'Sullivan (London and New York: Anthem Press, 2021), pp. 53–70.

forms, how important contributions to national literatures can persist throughout and even be rejuvenated by cultural upheavals.

Graham Allen uses a database to write his autobiographical poem *Holes*, expanding it by a line each day since 23 December 2006.[23] Many of the works produced by digital artist Conor McGarrigle 'have a strong literary and textual component',[24] while Geoffrey Squires has previously published 'digital texts which departed from traditional publishing processes'.[25] National University of Ireland, Galway's Justin Tonra, Brian Davis, David Kelly, and Waqas Khawaja used biometric data and natural language generation to create *Eververse*, a piece in which Tonra's quantified self was translated into literary output.[26] Fallow Media, which might now be considered the major publisher of digital literature in Ireland, has published a slate of web-based works, often elementary from a technical standpoint, but rich and vibrant nonetheless.[27] But these and some other exceptions aside, Irish digital literature has not yet achieved anything near the heights of what has been seen across many other forms of cultural production on this island.

Of course, Irish literature is not simply *from* but also *of* this island, and the influence of Irish culture can be found across the international canon of digital literature. Michael Joyce's connection to Ireland should not go unnoticed in an essay on this topic. As the author of *afternoon, a story* (1990), Joyce was once called the 'granddaddy of full-length hypertext fictions'.[28] In addition to being a frequent visitor to Irish shores – where he once spent a summer attending lectures by Louis de Paor at the Centre for Irish Studies, NUI Galway – Joyce's great-grandfather came from Mayo, from 'under the shadow of Glenn Nephin'.[29] Samantha Gorman, who founded Tender Claws studio with Danny Cannizzaro, is one of contemporary digital literature's most accomplished figures. In 2014,

[23] See holesbygrahamallen.org (accessed 20 June 2021); Graham Allen and James O'Sullivan, 'Collapsing Generation and Reception: *Holes* as Electronic Literary Impermanence', ed. Helen J. Burgess, *Hyperrhiz: New Media Cultures* 15 (2016), https://doi.org/10.20415/hyp/015.e01 (accessed 20 June 2021); Anne Karhio, 'The End of Landscape: *Holes* by Graham Allen', *Electronic Book Review*, 2017, https://doi.org/10.7273/c2j2-ra97 (accessed 20 June 2021).

[24] Karhio, 'Between Aesthetics and Institutions', p. 45.

[25] Kenneth Keating, 'Repetition and Alterity: Geoffrey Squires's "Texts for Screen"', *Irish University Review* 46:1 (21 April 2016), 145–57 (p. 145), https://doi.org/10.3366/iur.2016.0207 (accessed 20 June 2021).

[26] See eververse.nuigalway.ie (accessed 20 June 2021); Karhio, 'Between Aesthetics and Institutions', pp. 44–5.

[27] See fallowmedia.com (accessed 20 June 2021).

[28] Robert Coover, 'The End of Books', *The New York Times*, 21 June 1992, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/09/27/specials/coover-end.html (accessed 20 June 2021).

[29] O'Sullivan, 'Electronic Literature in Ireland'.

Gorman and Cannizzaro published *PRY* for Apple iOS, a piece of interactive fiction that would achieve extensive critical acclaim and popular recognition. Gorman was raised 'with a strong sense of Irish heritage', and credits a summer she spent in Dublin as somewhat influential in her shift towards combinatory aesthetics; specifically, encountering the *Book of Kells* made her 'realise what hybrid or illuminated writing could be'.[30] But Ireland cannot quite claim *PRY*. Irish digital literature has not yet made its *PRY*.

Anne Karhio examines this stasis in her assessment of Irish electronic poetry, questioning whether the state of the art is possibly a consequence of a general 'relative conservatism and near absence of an avant-garde culture' in Irish literature.[31] It may be that Irish digital literature has lagged behind its international counterparts because of a wider malaise in this island's literary culture; but any broader assessment of Irish literature's overall conservatism or radicalism sits far beyond the scope of this essay. Far more certain and relevant here is digital literature's lack of creative networks of practice, and consequentially, the collaborations that have never been.

No writer aspires to the penumbra of literary culture, so it is unsurprising that digital literature has not attracted more authors, publishers, and artists. Digital literature 'is not a market-driven literary phenomenon, but a community-driven scene with an accompanying set of aesthetic, social, and cultural values and practices'.[32] To be part of that community, one typically needs the privilege of an academic job or similar, affording the freedom to experiment with writing and machines without concern for earning a living; and if one does even a quick scan of the field, it will be found that many of its figures are indeed scholar-practitioners.[33] Writers have long had to sell their labour beyond what they produce on the page, but digital literature is a particularly hard sell, and a few lucrative large studio-based exceptions aside, a feasible model for small-scale commercial publishing of digital literature is yet to be devised.

In such a context, who would want to be an author of digital literature? In Ireland, there is no tribe, extremely limited institutional support, and few prospects.[34] If anything, experimenting with digital literature might hinder a career's progression, placing its dabblers, in the minds of our

[30] Ibid. [31] Karhio, 'Between Aesthetics and Institutions', p. 29.
[32] Eskelinen, Koskimaa, and Di Rosario, 'Electronic Literature Publishing', p. 235.
[33] Karhio, 'Between Aesthetics and Institutions', p. 42.
[34] It should be noted that Fallow Media receives support from The Arts Council, for which the latter should be commended.

national canon-makers, on the periphery of literary culture. That periphery is dominated by a form that has come to be known as 'video-poetry' or 'film-poetry'.[35] Film-poems are precisely as described: fragments of text accompanied by video and sound that are passively consumed. Film-poems are strange creatures, technically unsophisticated yet often intriguing. When one has seen the rich, immersive, interactive story spaces produced by digital literature's new wave – in walking simulators like *Dear Esther* and *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, or in a cinematic novella like *PRY* – it can be difficult to see what is radical, even worthwhile, in a film-poem: passages from print literature transposed atop video recordings and uploaded to YouTube. That is not to say that the film-poem genre cannot be considered digital literature – Astrid Ensslin convincingly argues that digital writing encompasses a myriad of forms, or 'various degrees of hybridity'[36] – but the dominance of this mode shows precisely how Irish literature 'has so far failed to adequately embrace the radical potential of [computer] technologies'.[37]

And yet, one can appreciate why the film-poem has proven so attractive within Ireland's literary and artistic communities. The film-poem is accessible, both in terms of the tools and practices of production, and in how it is disseminated and consumed. Artistic merits aside, most people are now capable of making a video, overlaying text, and uploading such content to their social media platform of choice. If a writer wants to explore the digital as aesthetic, film-poetry presents an intuitive entry point.

Spaces like YouTube now hold significant influence over the cultural conversation, so it is good to see poetry adapted to such platforms. Uploading video-poetry and born-digital literatures to social media may reclaim a small portion of these important cultural spaces from the other vapid sorts of content of which they are invariably comprised. Online videos reach those who do not read; they reach an increasing number of people who expend much of their leisure time on their mobile devices. If people no longer read literature, at least they might watch it.

The form also represents less of a departure from the national sense of literature than other modes: the term 'film-poetry', itself conjoining two familiar and institutionally accepted practices, warrants less exposition and justification than something like 'literary game'. Not everyone is convinced that video games are literature, particularly in circles where national canons

[35] O'Sullivan, 'Electronic Literature in Ireland'. [36] Ensslin, *Literary Gaming*, pp. 43–5.
[37] Kenneth Keating, 'Irish Poetry Publishing Online', *Éire-Ireland* 52:1–2 (2017), 321–36 (p. 334), https://doi.org/10.1353/eir.2017.0015 (accessed 22 June 2021).

are made and reformed. And it is because of this that it is surprising to see that a figure like Ní Ghríofa has frequently experimented with digital forms of writing. Considering the number of film-poems she has produced, their quality, and the fact that some have been exhibited in such spaces as the Illuminations gallery at Maynooth University and MoLI, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Ní Ghríofa is slowly becoming central to contemporary digital literature in Ireland.

I once wrote that Ní Ghríofa 'is unafraid as a poet'.[38] She is unafraid because she seems willing to jeopardise her place in the national literary tradition in the name of experimentation. Experimentation among writers is far from rare; what is rare are established authors who consistently explore maligned forms. This is why Ní Ghríofa is unafraid; she has risked her status by experimenting with forms which are not at all held in high regard by Ireland's canon-making critics, bodies, and publics. She is a bilingual author in the truest sense: she writes in Irish and English, apart and reciprocally. And she mirrors her ability for changeable tongues with an affinity for changeable interfaces. The latter is particularly brave, and among Irish authors with her profile, she stands somewhat alone.

In *A Ghost in the Throat*, Ní Ghríofa uses the life and writing of eighteenth-century poet Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill to frame her own memoir and craft. A telling moment with regard to the latter comes when Ní Ghríofa rejects the emphasis on authorship that one typically encounters in scholarly treatments of the Irish *caoineadh*.[39] Literary historians and critics are often enticed by the task of concluding the degree to which a particular individual contributed to a work composed extempore in the oral tradition. Ní Ghríofa thinks this perspective too 'suspicious', and instead is content to view the caoineadh form as that which is 'worked and woven by women, entwining strands of female voices that were carried in female bodies'.[40] Her own literary career pays tribute to this stance, much of her work emerging from collaborative weaves. Print-based interdisciplinary projects like *Nine Silences*, her willingness to collaborate with those whose practice can give her words a materiality and visuality they could not achieve alone, show this fascination. And it certainly emanates

[38] O'Sullivan, 'Electronic Literature in Ireland'.

[39] A definition and discussion of the caoineadh, a public lament for the dead usually offered by a woman for a man, can be found in Patricia Lysaght's survey of the form: '*Caoineadh Os Cionn Coirp*: The Lament for the Dead in Ireland', *Folklore* 108:1–2 (1 January 1997), 65–82, https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.1997.9715938 (accessed 22 June 2021).

[40] Doireann Ní Ghríofa, *A Ghost in the Throat* (Dublin: Tramp Press, 2020), p. 74.

from her digital work, which has seen Ní Ghríofa collaborate with many artists and practitioners.

Whatever the piece, the caoineadh tradition has left its mark on Ní Ghríofa's digital writing. Her works of digital fiction are weaves, of her voice, of other voices, voices both known and unknown, reused, amplified, visualised. She weaves language – Irish and English – as much as she weaves sound and image, so that her digital literature not only possesses modal combinatories, but also forms linguistic amalgams; the language and materiality mirroring each other's hybridity.

Ní Ghríofa's digital oeuvre[41] begins with *Glaoch/Call*,[42] a collaboration with the filmmaker Peter Madden, whom she befriended in college. Like many works of digital literature – think *Inkubus* by Andy Campbell and Christine Wilks – *Glaoch/Call* reflects on the grim reality of human conditions in a culture that is increasingly immersed in the digital. Many of Ní Ghríofa's film-poems are produced in collaboration with Madden, including *Rondelet on the Alchemy of Bacon Fat*,[43] *FéinPhic le Línte/Selfie with Lines*,[44] *Chronosequence*,[45] and *Today, Buried*.[46] The latter three also feature music by Linda Buckley. Ní Ghríofa also worked with Buckley on *Recipe for the Bad Times, the Sad Surprise Times, the No Light Times*.[47]

Readers of *A Ghost in the Throat* will find familiar thematic rhizomes throughout her digital work: desire, daydreaming, recovery, the freedom and drudgery in routine, hidden things. The text of *Today, Buried* tells of

[41] Some years ago, Doireann was kind enough to come and meet me in the basement of UCC's Glucksman gallery, at Bobo Café (sadly, now closed), to speak of some of her experiences creating digital literature.

[42] Doireann Ní Ghríofa and Peter Madden, *Glaoch*, Vimeo Video, 2014, https://vimeo.com/87665470 (accessed 22 June 2021). The text was originally published in *Dúlasair* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 2012) and in translation in *Lies* (Dublin: Dedalus Press, 2018).

[43] Doireann Ní Ghríofa and Peter Madden, *Rondelet on the Alchemy of Bacon Fat*, Vimeo Video, 2014, https://vimeo.com/110987344 (accessed 22 June 2021). The text was published in *Clasp* (Dublin: Dedalus Press, 2015).

[44] Doireann Ní Ghríofa, Peter Madden, and Linda Buckley, *FéinPhic le Línte/Selfie with Lines*, YouTube Video, 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ZZZQ4HJ9NQ (accessed 6 June 2021). The text was published in *Oighear* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 2017), and in translation in *Lies* (Dublin: Dedalus Press, 2018).

[45] Doireann Ní Ghríofa, Peter Madden, and Linda Buckley, *Chronosequence*, 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=EtjAlMpfoq8&t=300s (accessed 6 June 2021). The text was published by New Dublin Press (2016).

[46] Doireann Ní Ghríofa, Peter Madden, and Linda Buckley, *Today, Buried*, YouTube Video, 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6U1Pjav2OQ (accessed 6 June 2021). The text was originally commissioned by Crash Ensemble and published in the first issue of *The Well Review* (2017).

[47] Doireann Ní Ghríofa and Linda Buckley, *Recipe for the Bad Times, the Sad Surprise Times, the No Light Times*, YouTube Video, 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=QiHFIgwNtCo (accessed 6 June 2021). The text was originally commissioned by Poetry Ireland to mark Poetry Day 2018.

a stone 'buried in clay'.[48] These words seem almost typological; there always seems to be something buried, be that in gravestones, ruins, or faces, words or code, language or images. With the exception of *Rondelet on the Alchemy of Bacon Fat* – which parodies the style of Golden Age America – the pacing is often slow, the hues grey, the score augural. Like Ní Ghríofa's prose-length text, many of her digital works have something ghostly to their narrative. But any maleficence is tempered with stillness, by the intentional emptiness of Madden's scenes, in the expanded notes of Buckley's music, and in the way that we are often left alone with singular, rich sounds, be that the crack of bacon or the hum of bees. This approach is favoured throughout *Lorg/Remains*,[49] where a soundscape by Mick O'Shea emphasises the breakage being explored.[50]

Like many film-poems, these works are slow, surrealist, often abstract in their approach, but they also hold a more intuitive sense of narrative than is common for this genre. Ní Ghríofa believes that poetry should be accessible, that it should be an 'ordinary communication with people':

> It took me a long time to realise that when you come to a poem, it is possible to come to it like you would with a song on the radio – to just listen to a poem, to take pleasure in the music of a poem, to read it out loud, to see what it conjures in your own imagination.[51]

Her digital poetry seems like a realisation of that ambition: complex words articulated by the familiarity of film and music, the dominant modes of consumption in contemporary culture. As previously mentioned, four of Ní Ghríofa's film-poems were exhibited at Maynooth's Illuminations gallery in 2018.[52] This was a significant moment because art exhibitions which foreground digital literature are rare on this island,[53] so such an

[48] Ní Ghríofa, Madden, and Buckley, *Today, Buried*, 0:28.

[49] Doireann Ní Ghríofa and Mick O'Shea, *Lorg/Remains*, YouTube Video, 2016 (not currently available). The text was published in *Oighear* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 2017) and in translation in *Lies* (Dublin: Dedalus Press, 2018).

[50] O'Shea is one of Ireland's most distinguished soundscape artists, and the sound from *Lorg/Remains* is redolent of his contributions to *Beckett on Barracka*, a multi-modal performance by the Gaitkrash Theatre Company, which I was fortunate enough to experience live in the old Mr Bradley's Bar on Barrack Street in Cork city, back in November 2013.

[51] Marjorie Brennan, 'Doireann Ní Ghríofa: From Ghost in the Throat to Star the Dark', *Irish Examiner*, 5 April 2021, www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/artsandculture/arid-40257494.html (accessed 11 June 2021).

[52] Ní Ghríofa gives considerable credit to Colin Graham, Professor of English at Maynooth University, for approaching her with this opportunity. It motivated much of her digital writing.

[53] Included among the few other examples of such exhibitions are: *Moving Words*, curated by Dene Grigar (with support from Jeneen Naji) in 2014, again for *Illuminations*; at NUI Galway's Other Codes/Cóid Eile conference, organised by Anne Karhio in 2017; and *Peripheries* at the Glucksman gallery in UCC, curated by Chris Clarke and James O'Sullivan as part of the 2019

event, particularly one featuring a popular figure like Ní Ghríofa, represented an important milestone in terms of the public's engagement with the form. A further breakthrough came with the foundation of MoLI in 2019. A partnership between University College Dublin and the National Library of Ireland, MoLI has already spearheaded a number of digital initiatives, and is fast becoming a major sponsor of multimodal practices. To mark St Brigid's Day in 2021, MoLI and the Department of Foreign Affairs commissioned a series of film-poems called 'Three Poems for Brigid'.[54] Ní Ghríofa's *At Bridget's Well* was among the commissioned pieces,[55] alongside other works by Paula Meehan[56] and Nidhi Zak/Aria Eipe.[57]

Ní Ghríofa has also operated as a sole author of digital literature. Her solo practice – like that of many of her international contemporaries who work without the support of studios or technically proficient collaborators – is based on found technologies. As is the tendency with late modernist and postmodern aesthetics, many practitioners in the digital space rely on whatever is available to them in the realisation of their vision. Digital literature is, in many respects, an act of bricolage. When one cannot program, when one cannot render digital imagery or compose music, one must turn to remix and assemblage, to user-friendly tools and tinkering.[58] Ní Ghríofa's description of how she came to produce *Faoi Mhaignéidín Cuisneora, tá Grianghraf de Mhamó mar Chailín Scoile/Under a Fridge Magnet, a Photo of Grandmother as a Schoolgirl* typifies this ethos.[59] When an iPad came into her possession by chance, Ní Ghríofa decided to use the device to start making digital pieces 'on her own', to become a bricoleur in her own right, fashioning her assemblages through

Electronic Literature Conference & Media Arts Festival. The latter featured a film-poem by Cork poet Colm Scully entitled *The Origin of Superlatives*; see https://cora.ucc.ie/handle/10468/8138 (accessed 6 June 2021).

[54] See 'Three Poems for Brigid', Museum of Literature Ireland, 2021, moli.ie/digital/three-poems-for-brigid/ (accessed 6 June 2021).

[55] Doireann Ní Ghríofa, Osaro Azams, and Syn, *At Bridget's Well*, YouTube Video, 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=kL1YHXwGThs&t=17s (accessed 6 June 2021).

[56] Paula Meehan, Ruth McCabe, and Dowry, *Old Biddy Talk*, YouTube Video, 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=3w7vSHyEx80 (accessed 6 June 2021).

[57] Nidhi Zak /Aria Eipe, Caitríona Ennis, and Dreamcycles, *i mbolc/an invocation*, YouTube Video, 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=qiO-i8_ZlKA (accessed 6 June 2021).

[58] O'Sullivan, *Towards a Digital Poetics*, p. 65.

[59] Doireann Ní Ghríofa, *Faoi Mhaignéidín Cuisneora, tá Grianghraf de Mhamó mar Chailín Scoile/Under a Fridge Magnet, a Photo of Grandmother as a Schoolgirl*, YouTube Video, 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=YV_SVoBpY7U (accessed 6 June 2021). The text was published by the Poetry Society, and subsequently in *Oighear* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 2017) and in translation in *Lies* (Dublin: Dedalus Press, 2018).

a mishmash of free apps and public domain images and tracks. When capturing images, she would fashion the iPad to her (as she describes it) 'primitive rig' – stacks of books or the laundry basket or whatever else was at hand in lieu of a tripod. That tension between the natural and the mechanical surfaces here: Ní Ghríofa is at ease with language, less so with artificial interfaces; equipped with some skills and tools, lacking in others; but as is the hallmark of the bricoleur, she is prepared to toil in meeting the two. And it is all, as she herself puts it, a simple attempt at 'giving text a different type of life through the internet'.

Ní Ghríofa's collaborations with Tim Keane, specifically *Craquelure*[60] and *Le Tatú a Bhaint/Tattoo Removal*,[61] represent a stylistic departure from her norm. These pieces are more reminiscent of the style of Seoul-based duo Young-Hae Chang and Marc Voge, better known as Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries. Encountering the expeditious, concrete-style poetic fragments of the Ní Ghríofa–Keane collaborations, one thinks immediately of Young-Hae titles like *Dakota* and *Lotus Blossom*.[62] Young-Hae Chang is Korean and Marc Voge American, and they produced *Dakota* and *Lotus Blossom* in 2001 and 2002 respectively. It is noteworthy to see such semblance between works created across such removed cultural and temporal contexts.

Furthermore, Ní Ghríofa admits to knowing very little about the critical contexts and legacy in which digital/electronic literature is steeped. Digital literature is a field dominated by scholar-practitioners and may consequently be an exclusionary space that is often very disconnected from practitioners beyond academia. Ní Ghríofa is a rare creature as far as Irish digital literature is concerned – she has never been a professional academic. This suggests a positive future for digital literature in Ireland; while there are not many other practitioners from beyond the academy already, there may be many others soon. Institutes of education have an important role to play in the promotion and development of this form, as evidenced by the many scholars who have worked tirelessly to sustain and

[60] Doireann Ní Ghríofa and Tim Keane, *Craquelure*, YouTube Video, 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=7nogWniA-3Q&t=44s (accessed 6 June 2021). The text was first published in *The Poetry Review* (Spring 2018).

[61] Doireann Ní Ghríofa and Tim Keane, *Le Tatú a Bhaint/Tattoo Removal*, YouTube Video, 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=lVBwsyyQ5Xw (accessed 6 June 2021). The text was published in *Oighear* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 2017) and in translation in *Lies* (Dublin: Dedalus Press, 2018).

[62] As these pieces were originally created in Flash, which is now, essentially, obsolete, it is difficult to find a citable example of the works, though they are readily enough available in various locations online. Further details on the works can be found in the ELMCIP Knowledge Base: elmcip.net/node/565 (*Dakota*), elmcip.net/node/2387 (*Lotus Blossom*) (accessed 6 June 2021).

advance digital literature, both in Ireland and elsewhere. But teaching and research in this domain needs to cast a wider net, beyond those cohorts that have been defined by academic associations, so that digital literature can thrive as art, so that communities of practice can develop beyond campus walls.

There are other instances of digital literature's past being rejuvenated by Ní Ghríofa. Two of her works with Ian Maleney's Fallow Media – *Postcards from a Hospital*[63] and *Mandible*[64] – offer traces of first-generation digital literature. *Postcards from a Hospital*, in particular, is constructed in the fashion of early hypertextual fictions typical of the Eastgate School.[65] In an essay titled 'Fidelity' in Maleney's *Minor Monuments*, he recounts a period in his life when he was frequently making sound recordings, and how some of these recordings were 'natural and realistic' while others were 'distorted, synthesised, or out of whack in some way'.[66] *Mandible* seems to be the literary manifestation of this mix: the words are clear, the imagery gnarled.[67] Maleney's discussion of fidelity provides a useful metaphor for what digital literature is, the 'immaculate' mixed with the 'strange and unexpected'. Code, the underlying mathematical structure, is the immaculate; precise and rigidly constrained. The literary is strange and unexpected, using the affordances of computerised constraint to do something other than what might be possible with print.

And in Ní Ghríofa's digital literature we find a challenge to our critical perceptions of what digital literature should be, what fidelity looks like in this context. As noted, many scholars contend that digital literature is an impossibly broad term, or what Scott Rettberg deems a 'moving target'.[68] Ní Ghríofa's work certainly satisfies many of the prevailing definitions: these works are inherently digital in that they cannot function without

[63] Doireann Ní Ghríofa, *Postcards from a Hospital*, ed. Ian Maleney (Dublin: Fallow Media, 2016), https://fallowmedia.com/2016/mar/postcards/ (accessed 6 June 2021).

[64] Doireann Ní Ghríofa and Linda Buckley, *Mandible*, ed. Ian Maleney (Dublin: Fallow Media, 2017), https://fallowmedia.com/2017/nov/mandible (accessed 8 June 2021). The text from *Mandible* was first published in the ninth issue of *gorse* (2017).

[65] The 'Eastgate School' refers to the group of authors who used Storyspace, a web-authoring tool created by publishing company Eastgate Systems, to launch what is considered the 'golden age' of hypertext fiction. It included such titles and figures as *afternoon, a story* by Michael Joyce (1990), *Victory Garden* by Stuart Moulthrop (1992), and *Patchwork Girl* by Shelley Jackson (1995).

[66] Ian Maleney, *Minor Monuments* (Dublin: Tramp Press, 2019), p. 111.

[67] It is also worth noting that the three pieces she did with Fallow Media – *A Jaw, Ajar* (2016) being the third – are prose works, which was, at the time of their publication, a rare departure from poetry for Ní Ghríofa.

[68] Scott Rettberg, 'Editorial Process and the Idea of Genre in Electronic Literature in the Electronic Literature Collection, Volume 1', *Archiving Electronic Literature and Poetry: Problems, Tendencies, Perspectives* 29:1–2 (2010), 85–95 (p. 93).

a computer. Her Fallow works, and the film-poetry genre as a whole, feel like a throwback to previous generations of digital literature, but that is not a negative thing. While the hyper-interactivity and immersion of 'game-like' spaces are fashionable among some critics and commentators, Ní Ghríofa's canon, perhaps the wider Irish digital canon, shows the value in older digital modalities. Such a realisation may be Ireland's main contribution to the international state of the art: that the digital as old can have a place alongside the digital as new. There is something profoundly immersive about *Chronosequence* and *Today, Buried*, and a hint of agency, even exploration, in *Postcards from a Hospital*. Whatever classifiers we apply to these works – filmic, born-digital, multimodal, hypertextual – they are rich literary experiences. Certainly, they are not print. Many have existed as print, but in such acts of remediation these works have become something different, not lesser or greater, just different. One cannot read *Today, Buried* in *The Well Review* and get the same experience as one would by watching/hearing/absorbing it in its digital form. Ní Ghríofa herself admits that new things about her texts are revealed to her through this process. That she has allowed her work to exist in both states shows her allegiance to form over convention, even expectation. Ní Ghríofa says that she works with computers because it allows her to show how a poem she has written 'feels' to her. The digital allows her to do that, to show that feeling. The natural and the mechanical.

In *The Architect's Dream of Winter* (2013), Cork poet Billy Ramsell reflects on our world of machines, how our culture is determined by the digital.[69] In 'Code', Ramsell collapses the (perhaps artificial) separation between nature and machine, between life and information. The natural is mechanical. The present and future of Ireland's digital literatures should be more widely and thoroughly considered and supported so that the general national malaise, the lack of institutional supports, and absence of communities of practice might be corrected. There is some urgency to this matter, because digital literature has an essential role to play in reclaiming digital culture – and thus so much culture – from forces that see digital technologies only in terms of power, commerce, and surveillance. As we become increasingly digital – and perhaps we are already entirely so – it is vital that literature adapts so that it does not become obsolete to a great many people. Print will always be fundamental to literature, but if authors, publishers, and public bodies continue to diminish the value of digital

[69] See Anne Karhio's contribution to this volume, 'Technology in Contemporary Irish Poetry' (Chapter 17), for a more in-depth analysis of Ramsell's poetry.

forms of writing, generations will be lost to mindless scrolling and vapid apps. The strategic and sustained development of digital literature in Ireland can ensure national and local challenges are problematised through some of the most influential modes and platforms. Ireland needs both its Ramsells and Ní Ghríofas: those who use literature to reflect on the digital, and those who use the digital in the service of the literary.

Film-poetry is a good start. As accounted for by Álvaro Seiça, other countries have a similar origin story: E. M. de Melo e Castro with *Roda Lume* (Portugal, 1968), Peter Weibel's *Augentexte* (Austria, 1975), Tom Konyves's *Sympathies of War* (Canada, 1978), the 'poetronica' of Gianni Toti like *Per Una Videopoesia* (Italy, 1980), and *Partitions* by Richard Kostelanetz (United States, 1986).[70] It is to be hoped that Ireland's film-poets will add further to the genre's national canon, and those works which have already been produced will be properly recognised for their foundational part in Irish digital literature. And we might also hope to see more authors like Ní Ghríofa – figures who are both popular and critically acclaimed – explore the narrative affordances of new media, or even old new media. As difficult as it may be for lesser-known artists already working in this space to acknowledge, when high-profile practitioners put their name to digital literature, it reifies the form in the public consciousness.

It will be interesting to see the trajectory of Ní Ghríofa's future career, how her experimentation with forms beyond print responds to the pressures of fame and expectation. She mentions her own fallibilities throughout *A Ghost in the Throat* and in subsequent interviews;[71] it is easy to imagine an author who writes and speaks so openly about vulnerability as someone who might not be entirely comfortable with their fame; but if that has proved a burden, Ní Ghríofa carries it well, using the daises afforded to her to speak with authority on women's issues, difficult issues, often effaced issues, her own issues. Ní Ghríofa, whose writing appeals to multiple generations and shifts between Ireland's two dominant languages, whose words can be compelling while their delivery measured, seems suited and qualified to assume a pivotal role in the cultural imagination of this island. Recognising that figure's affinity for the digital can bring about a major

[70] Álvaro Seiça, 'Kinetic Poetry', in *Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities: Contexts, Forms, and Practices*, ed. Dene Grigar and James O'Sullivan (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), pp. 173–202 (pp. 186–8).

[71] Aoife Barry, '"It's so Astounding that a Woman Can Disappear to that Extent": Rediscovering the Author of Ireland's Greatest Love Poem', *thejournal.ie*, 20 September 2020, www.thejournal.ie/doireann-nii-ghriofa-interview-new-book-a-ghost-in-the-throat-5204383-Sep2020/ (accessed 23 June 2021).

upheaval in the literary culture of this island by drawing digital literature in from the margins. Such re-centring would cast light on the work of effaced digital practitioners already in existence, while encouraging other authors and artists, both emerging and established, to explore the literary possibilities in computers and code. Speaking at University College Cork in the summer of 2019, Ian Maleney of Fallow Media warned of how the digital 'remains subordinate to print', that the general perception among authors, critics, audiences, and policymakers is that digital content is trivial to produce, and that should that perception fail to change, these new forms would not survive.[72] Ní Ghríofa's sustained engagement with the digital might change that perception, but whatever she does next, Doireann Ní Ghríofa has already done much for Irish digital literature.

This War of Mine,[73] released by Warsaw-based 11 Bit Studios in 2014, manipulates the false sense of agency offered by games – specifically, the inevitability of a bleak ending regardless of how 'well' the player does – to show the inescapable horror of war as experienced by civilians. Set in a fictional war-torn city, suggestive of eastern Europe, the piece mixes play and storytelling in a way that both rejuvenates and defamiliarises the war theme in a manner that has arguably not been achieved by any other work of fiction in recent years. Digital literature offers authors and storytellers an opportunity to transform readers into active participants in fictional commemorations, explorations, and retellings of national myths, societal failings, and human struggles. Ireland is a country steeped in storytelling, steeped in history both great and good, steeped in so much that could be made new through digital modes of writing. And yet we have produced nothing comparable to *This War of Mine*, or indeed, many of the other contemporary works of digital literature offered as exemplars of what might be. Ireland's authors and artists often speak of experimentation, but until they have the collaborative, infrastructural, and financial frameworks necessary to create digital literature of real international significance, this island's contributions to the artistic and cultural fabric of the ongoing digital turn will remain unrealised.

[72] Ian Maleney, 'New Models, New Forms: A Practical Guide to Web-Native Publishing', in *ELO2019 Programme and Book of Abstracts*, ed. James O'Sullivan (Cork: University College Cork, 2019), 104, https://cora.ucc.ie/handle/10468/8128 (accessed 23 June 2021).

[73] As previously suggested with *Dear Esther* and *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, readers who are unfamiliar with *This War of Mine* can get a sense of the piece by searching for walkthroughs and commentaries on YouTube. It is also available for compatible mobile devices through the various app stores, or for desktop from Steam.

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