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Electronic Literature in Ireland

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Literary Ireland has long embraced experimentation.¹ So, in an artistic community that typically gravitates towards the new, it is culturally anomalous to see that electronic literature² has failed to flourish. Ireland, sitting at the nexus between the North American and European e-lit communities, should be playing a more active role in what is becoming an increasingly significant literary movement. This article provides a much needed account of the field of electronic literature as it exists at present within an Irish context, simultaneously exploring those circumstances which have contributed to its successes and failures. Doing so rectifies a major gap in the national media archaeologies of this field, presenting an incomplete yet untold culturally specific literary history. While a complete literary history of Ireland’s e-lit community³ cannot be accomplished within the constraints of this single essay—there will inevitably be limitations in scope, practitioners I have failed to acknowledge, writings I have missed in my review—what can be achieved here is the beginning of a discourse which will hopefully flourish in years to come.

Electronic Literature as Community

What makes for a literary movement? In many respects, literary movements are, like any cohort, little more than the coming together of like-minded individuals who share a common interest in a particular ideology or practice—communities are about a shared *culture*, some elusive thing that binds. The ability to convincingly identify a movement and its lines of aesthetic demarcation, however vague, largely comes through subsequent critical interventions. The inherent risk is that such interventions are determined by the institutions and cultural contexts from which they emerge, and so, when I speak of the e-lit movement, I am typically referring to a largely westernised⁴ community of scholars and practitioners⁵ operating under the umbrella of the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO). Like any organisation of this nature, particular cultural contexts will inevitably be emphasised. In the case of the ELO, the body was founded and developed under predominantly American influences, comprising a leadership and membership largely situated within North America and Europe. As many of us—that is, those who are most likely to read this essay—have found our peers through ELO-based interactions, it is natural that our view of the e-lit movement would be confined to the aforementioned regions and contexts. This is not a criticism of the ELO—a group which does valuable work promoting electronic literature across the globe—but rather, an acceptance of the fact that our appreciation of that which constitutes a movement is greatly influenced by the creative and critical cultures in which we ourselves are situated.

I make these points in the knowledge that this essay is founded on a dangerous premise, the suggestion that Ireland's e-lit community is not as mature as its American and European counterparts. There may well be Irish communities of practice of which I am ignorant, artistic groups that have never held any interest in interacting with the same ELO-based cohort as myself, or who, siloed as much as the rest of us, are unaware of the existence of such bodies. If one accepts that the idea of an e-lit movement or community will differ depending on the scholarly or cultural contexts involved, then it should be noted that, *for me*, the e-lit movement is the community of scholarly and artistic practice which operates between Europe and North America, and typically comes under the auspices of the ELO. Thus, this narrative operates within very specific cultural and community contexts, situating artistic practice in Ireland within very "ELO-centric" conceptualisations of electronic literature. Scholars interested in the broader topic of e-lit communities would be well served familiarising themselves with *Electronic Literature Communities* (Rettberg, Tomaszek, and Baldwin 2015), or indeed, the *Electronic Literature Collection: Volume 3* (Boluk et al. 2016), which usefully allows readers to segment works by country of origin. My concern is much narrower, my concern is with electronic literature and its place within literary Ireland.

Film Poems / Poetry Films in Contemporary Irish Literature

In an international context, the history of born-digital literature has not yet been thoroughly documented; most scholars have focused on theorisation, as opposed to excavation, of the field.⁶ Manovich expresses similar concerns, drawing parallels with cinema and his fear that "future theorists and historians of computer media will be left with not much more than the equivalents of the newspaper reports and film programs from cinema's first decades" (2001, 6). The history of electronic literature is one which has neglected particular regional contexts, though it is scholars like myself who must assume the blame for this neglect—our role is to extract meaning from the creativity and cultural production we wish to see protected, achieving preservation through criticism as curation. Those of us who wish greater prominence for our national contexts should make the effort to achieve just that, following the lead of scholars who have accounted for the French (Bouchardon 2012), Nordic (Rustad 2012), and Catalonian (Castanyer 2012) communities. This is not to say that Ireland is without its e-lit scholars—Anne Karhio, Jeneen Naji, and Kenneth Keating have done work on the topic (Naji 2012; Karhio 2014, 2015; Karhio et al. 2015; Karhio 2017; Keating 2017),⁷ while Nerys Williams, a high-profile critic who largely works on print literature, has also touched on the form (2011)—rather, it is merely an acknowledgement that, as a national cohort, we need to do more.

Considering the vibrancy of Ireland's literary grassroots, it is surprising that a more dynamic community of e-lit practitioners has not yet come to the fore—they might exist, but if so, then they are going about their business rather discreetly. For me, the idea of a literary grassroots encapsulates the community of artists and practitioners who operate within a context that is sustained by the space that they occupy. Space is paramount, in that the constituents of a strong artistic grassroots are usually bound by proximity. Proximity is not just about logistics, though it helps when these groups of like-minded individuals can coalesce; it is also about a shared socio-cultural context—art emerges from one's environment, so shared environments will mean shared/contested aesthetics. The aforementioned vibrancy of Ireland's literary grassroots is difficult to quantify, but there are a few resources to which one

might point as evidence for such: publicly-funded bodies like the Munster Literature Centre and Poetry Ireland, for example, are continually disseminating calls for submissions, workshops, competitions, and readings. The former runs two major international poetry and short story festivals, as well as numerous prestigious prizes and competitions. Despite what many may see as a lack of public support for the Arts, new journals, writers, and literary projects continue to emerge, and, as one would expect in trying times, new literary stars are born (Jordan 2015; Gilmartin 2015; Tannam 2016; Nolan 2016). On an island where literature is so fundamental to the artistic consciousness, it is remarkable that relatively few authors have engaged with the digital as a literary instrument.

It is in the notion of literary grassroots that we find some insight into this problem: Irish cultural production is, at a certain level, very much about the existence of networks of practice.⁸ Authors undergo something of a rite of passage—participating in workshops and readings, publishing in journals of varying prestige—in an effort to hone their craft and build their reputation among peers. Ireland’s community of e-lit practitioners is still fledgling, and so this vital network has simply not yet matured. Again, this idea is difficult to measure, but *you can see it*, in weekly gatherings like Ó Bhéal, at the aforementioned Munster Literature festivals⁹—the same faces appear, they know each other, they share ideas and words and develop in unison. Electronic literature has no real place of equivalence, a place for exchange; there are signs, however, of the digital beginning a slow but steady permeation. Doireann Ní Ghríofa has been experimenting with multimodality for several years (Ní Ghríofa 2016a, 2016b, 2016c), while Graham Allen is writing a one-line-a-day autobiographical piece entitled *Holes* (Karhio 2017),¹⁰ published by my own New Binary Press (Allen and O’Sullivan 2016). During a Q&A at the 2018 Cork International Poetry Festival, Elaine Cosgrove, one of Ireland’s finest young writers (O’Sullivan 2018), explained that she was learning to code so that she might better explore computational aesthetics. In 2012, Geoffrey Squires published “a number of digital texts which departed from traditional publishing processes and were disseminated online through various media” (Keating 2016, 145), while some of Dublin artist Conor McGarrigle’s work might be counted as literary.

The aforementioned works by Ní Ghríofa, in particular, represent a popular trend in Ireland’s community of multimodal practitioners—the rise of what are being referred to as video-poems, film-poems, and poetry films, which rely, essentially, on the presentation of poetic language within traditionally cinematic frames. This form has become hugely popular amongst Irish writers and filmmakers: Ní Ghríofa’s work continues to draw attention and was recently exhibited at Maynooth University (NUIM 2018), Emmet Kirwan’s *Heartbreak* was a viral success (Mackin 2017), George Hooker’s 8mm rendition of Eleanor Hooker’s poem “Insight: i.m. Michael Hartnett” was selected for the Straight8 International Film Competition’s London premiere in Piccadilly last year, and pioneering publishers like Fallow Media, based in Dublin, are producing an increasingly intriguing volume of multimodal works.

I refer to these authors as examples of how the digital is gaining something of a foothold within Ireland’s literary scene: Ní Ghríofa and Allen are established authors who have been the recipients of multiple high-profile accolades for print literature. Ní Ghríofa includes the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature (Doyle 2016) amongst her awards, while Allen was recipient of the Listowel Single Poem Prize in 2010 (Allen 2010).¹¹ Cosgrove was shortlisted for the dlr Shine Strong Poetry Award in 2018, generally considered one of Ireland’s most prestigious prizes for debut collections (mountaintosea.ie 2018). Undoubtedly, my decision to list these works

will be of interest to those engaged in the “what is e-lit” debate: while fully subscribed to Ensslin’s idea of a literary-ludic spectrum (2014, 43–45), I have long aligned myself with the school of thought which would *probably* exclude something like a poetry film from being classified as born-digital (Heckman and O’Sullivan 2018). But regardless of whether or not one considers some of these works to “count” as electronic literature, they show that an increasing number of accomplished Irish authors are turning towards the affordances of the screen.

Ní Ghríofa, in particular, is unafraid as a poet. For a poet to be unafraid is more important, and less frequent, than it may seem. On the occasion of her Rooney Prize acceptance speech, Ní Ghríofa called on Irish legislators to repeal the Eight Amendment forbidding access legal abortion in Ireland, offering anti-establishment gestures in the most establishment of contexts. On other occasions she has taken to social media to criticise major national bodies—bodies who are the bread and butter of a poet who sees writing as their profession—but with sardonic tact and wit that makes her criticisms of the constructive sort. But this isn’t what makes Ní Ghríofa unafraid, what makes her so is a willingness to be more than one thing, to be more than just another successor in the long literary lineage to which she clearly belongs. Many writers find their thing and do it well, and in Ireland, the thing to do is print-based English language literature: Ní Ghríofa has found the time to experiment with page and screen, with both Irish and English, with changeable interfaces and tongues. Irish poetry is often a hostile place, where many writers expend a great deal of energy calling every parish but their own into question: Ní Ghríofa is seemingly determined to be of all parishes, or perhaps, of no parish; determined to place expression before expectation and convention.

Her work also operates as an ontological provocation: can Ní Ghríofa’s film-poems, as they are called, be considered electronic literature, after all? Film-poems lack many of the modal affordances presented by contemporary digital platforms, but they do operate as screen-based fictions which, when executed as more than remediated print works, profoundly influence the ways in which readers engage with the literary. Ní Ghríofa is not the first Irish author to use computers for expression, but she is one of few who has done so having much to lose. Whatever future paths Ní Ghríofa’s already accomplished career follows, she can already be acknowledged for giving this genre the creative care and attention necessary to see it legitimised within Ireland’s literary canon.

On the peripheries of that canon, other, equally noteworthy individuals and groups have been at work, with gatherings like the SoundEye Festival of the Arts of the Word having spent decades promoting literature which engages with “many other forms of contemporary art” (Joyce 2009, 84). Furthermore, Irish e-lit has also, on occasion, penetrated the broader international community, the third instalment of the ELO’s Electronic Literature Collection including a Twitter bot, *poem.exe*, by Dublin-based software engineer, Liam Cooke (2016). The stuff is there, it is just hard to find—perhaps intentionally. What Ireland lacks is a substantial body of literary works which represent both literary excellence and might also be considered to be electronic literature in the contemporary sense of the term—but now is the time for that body to emerge, for electronic literature is only now having its contemporary moment (O’Sullivan 2017b).

Irish Electronic Literature beyond the Island

Irish literature is more than the sum of what happens on this island, more than that which is produced by those who might call Ireland home. Irish literature is not *from* Ireland, it is *of* Ireland, and several e-lit authors from beyond our shores have been influenced by our literary heritage, and indeed, taken Irish matters as their subject. Indeed, Michael Joyce, hailed as the “granddaddy of full-length hypertext fiction” (Coover 1992), holds an Irish connection, his great grandfather having come from Glenavenue, Mayo, under the shadow of Glenn Nephin. Joyce is no stranger to this island, and on one of his many visits, spent a summer auditing lectures by Louis de Paor at NUI Galway’s Centre for Irish Studies, where he also made the acquaintance of celebrated Connemara poet, Mary O’Malley.¹² John Barber, an American sound artist based in Vancouver, Washington, created *Remembering the Dead: Northern Ireland*,¹³ a piece which pays tribute to the victims of the Troubles, the decades-long violent political conflict in Northern Ireland. The work is an iteration of a previous sound art installation wherein Barber memorialised the victims of gun violence in the United States (Barber 2016). Judy Malloy—the creator of one of the first commercial works of electronic literature (Grigar and Moulthrop 2015)—writes about Ireland in her hypertextual piece, *From Ireland with Letters*, seeing the practice as a continuation of what she describes as the “tradition of Irish public literature” (Malloy 2016).

Samantha Gorman, who works in partnership with Danny Cannizzaro, is arguably, alongside Mez Breeze and Andy Campbell, one of contemporary electronic literature’s most influential figures. In 2014, working under the moniker of their Tender Claws studio, Gorman and Cannizzaro released *PRY*, a piece of interactive screen fiction which would go on to considerable critical acclaim and, most notably for the form, *popular* success: *PRY* was selected by Apple as one of the 25 best apps of 2015, was a Future of Storytelling Prize finalist, and an IGF finalist for “Excellence in Narrative”. One verdict issued in the *Los Angeles Review of Book* provides an apt description of the piece: “Everyone interested in the contemporary state or future of literature as a hybrid tactile mediated experience should experience *Pry*” (Jhave 2014). Last year, Gorman and Cannizzaro had further success when their growing studio’s *VVR* won the Google Play Award for Best VR Experience.

We find in figures like Gorman the future of electronic literature and literary gaming, and the origins of her international success can be traced, in some small part, to Dublin, where she first encountered the *Book of Kells*. Gorman was raised in the Catholic tradition by a family with a strong sense of Irish heritage; growing up on the east coast of the United States, in Providence, Rhode Island, she was surrounded by that “strange Americanisation of what Ireland is in the imagination”.¹⁴ While still in high school she spent a summer at Trinity College, becoming acquainted with the *Book* which seemed a natural fit for how she was starting to think about narrative: “It made me realise what hybrid or illuminated writing could be”.¹⁵ For Gorman, the *Book of Kells*, and how its text would transform into images, stood out as something of a “combination”¹⁶ pointing to the combinatory aesthetics that would emanate from the semiotics of her later work. As a freshman at Brown, Gorman studied under celebrated author Robert Coover, where she first became interested in multimodal forms, her undergraduate thesis being an early version of her first high-profile work of electronic literature, the aptly named *Book of Kells*. It is interesting that, six or seven years after she had left Dublin, the text’s influence on Gorman had not abated.

While still in high school, Gorman was already thinking about hypertextual narrative, and indeed, hypertextual mapping as a writing process. This is why the *Book of Kells* has had such a profound influence on her art—the teenage Gorman,

seeking some alternative to dominant literary forms, became entranced by the Celtic knots that she encountered while studying at Trinity. The mathematical construction of these knots provided a schematic which she found useful when thinking about different nodes in a hypertextual world, about “how changes in technology changes the ways we read and write and navigate stories”.¹⁷ As Gorman matured as a multimodal practitioner, this foundational influence persisted to a degree: in her new work, instead of a rhizomatic model of exploration, the reader encounters more of an authored, “linear” story that can be explored at different points—there is a tension between the control of the author and reader, which Gorman notes, “comes from Kells”.¹⁸

Undoubtedly, there are other examples of Irish electronic literature that I have neglected, both conspicuous and concealed, but until we have a more comprehensive account of Ireland’s community of digital practitioners, a major gap in the history of our cultural production will persist. The examples that I do raise are not being placed upon some pedestal—though neither should their significance be diminished by this statement—rather, they are simply a few of potentially many examples of how the digital has penetrated, in some small way, Ireland’s literary conventions. I have little doubt that there are many authors and artists, in both a national and international context, who have embedded computation in the aesthetics of their work; practitioners whose work will come to the fore as we continue to develop our media archaeology and digital literary history. E-lit is typically produced outside of those artistic circles which dominate the public consciousness, so some elision is to be expected. The future of this history is promising in a national context which is fostering and supporting research and scholarship in relevant fields (O’Sullivan, Murphy, and Day 2015). All Irish scholars, practitioners, and institutions have a role to play in such an archaeological endeavour. What we do know is that Ireland’s e-lit community, in the ELO-sense of the notion, potentially began in Dundalk with Michael Maguire and his creative studio, Táintechn.

The Rise and Fall of Táintechn

Michael J. Maguire is arguably the nation’s most prominent e-lit practitioner; he has certainly long been one of the stalwarts of the Irish community within the broader international cohort. Born in Dundalk to Kathleen and Gerry Maguire, his late father was a drummer, a musician who hailed from a family that had five brothers playing in the same orchestra. Given his origins, Maguire was bound for a career in the Arts. His literary career began under the mentorship of Tomás Mac Anna, a fellow native of Dundalk, and one of Ireland’s most accomplished directors and playwrights, who, at the time of his death, was heralded as having “lived for the Abbey”¹⁹ and playing “a key role in modernising Irish theatre” (Carbery 2011). The pair first crossed paths when Mac Anna cast Maguire as Eusebius Cassidy in a production of P. J. O’Connor’s stage-adaptation of Patrick Kavanagh’s *Tarry Flynn*, sponsored by Dundalk’s Urban District Council (see Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Michael J. Maguire (left) performing in *Tarry Flynn*²⁰

Mac Anna also made Maguire his production assistant, a position he retained when Mac Anna was subsequently asked to produce Paul Vincent Carroll's *Shadow and Substance*, with his protégé cast in the role of Father Corr (see Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Michael J. Maguire (right) performing in *Shadow and Substance*²¹

Maguire speaks fondly of his time with Mac Anna, detailing long discussions through permanent plumes of cigarette smoke with a man he describes as “an incredible erudite and intelligent man, generous and opinionated, full to the brim with witticisms and anecdotes and a total joy to be around”.²²

Both of the Urban District Council productions were huge successes, employing a semi-professional production model wherein the Abbey provided support

in the form of professional craft expertise, such as in the sets and lighting. Both *Tarry Flynn* and *Shadow and Substance* played for a week to full houses at Dundalk's Townhall Theatre. Maguire used the success as a platform for his own career as a producer and playwright: having been appointed Writer in Residence for the Urban District Council, he would go on to write, direct, and perform in his own two act play, *Issac's Legacy*. Already at this early point in his career we can see Maguire's desire to be all things to his work: just as he would go on to be both developer, writer, and visual artist in his electronic literature—an atypical trend considering the high volume of collaborations within the e-lit community—Maguire used the stage to foster the interdisciplinary imagination that would define his future practice.

Maguire's first computers were the Commodore 64 and ZX Spectrum, 8-bit personal machines that would not have been the norm in Irish households of the early eighties. Writing in BASIC, Maguire experimented with early text adventures—the first of which he wrote in 1983 and called *Lost in Coolock*—but a lack of feasible storage meant that he often had to sacrifice sketches and scripts so that others could experience the fruits of his labour. When Maguire speaks of the era, he mentions “Borland C++, a few tortured hours making screen titles for video by programming an Atari, different types and sorts of rich media documents”.²³ The cultural context should not be forgotten: this was long before truly portable electronics, before policymakers had conceived of Ireland's so-called “smart economy”, and computation had not yet permeated the domestic sphere to the degree of saturation with which we are now familiar. We can see from Maguire's early career that much of his work was based locally, and therefore rooted in the social, physical, and cultural landscapes of his upbringing. Born in what was then widely categorised as a Republican²⁴ stronghold, Maguire describes his youth in Dundalk as one of “cultural intimidation”, and art was a means to “circumvent” such forces (Maguire 2015). Beyond his political and theatrical influences, we find the figure of his uncle, who owned a television repair shop, and it was here that a young Michael Maguire would tinker with audio-visual equipment, developing his fondness for electronics while distracting him from the social pressure of “pursuing a cause” (Maguire 2015).

As the eighties drew to a close, Maguire had carved out a relatively successful career in the theatre, largely through the Travelling Hibernian Ensemble, a travelling theatre and multimedia company he himself had founded. It was also around this time that he had been introduced to William Gibson and cyberpunk, and was becoming increasingly pre-occupied with the creative affordances of technology, such that, in the early-nineties, Maguire's first synthesis between stage and screen was brought to the public: a multimedia show titled, *Ham-Let Loose*.²⁵ It was around this time that Maguire encountered the high-profile Liverpoolian author Frank Cottrell-Boyce in the faculty bar at Queen's University Belfast. Cottrell-Boyce was by then a successful television writer, and he encouraged his Irish counterpart to follow suit. Maguire had already done some writing for RTÉ,²⁶ Ireland's national broadcaster, and had also been encouraged by producers at the BBC to further develop his natural flair for dialogue. It was during this period that Maguire was deeply considering which medium would best be suited to his forthcoming artistic endeavours, and he emerged from such reflection determined to remain with the screen, but not that of television, rather, the computer. Maguire's education reflects this narrative: he studied theatre at Maynooth University, but also enrolled in Dundalk Institute of Technology's Enterprise Program. Sitting “in a shed with an Apple”,²⁷ Maguire realised that the future of digital narrative was not in television, but in the fast-emerging videogame industry, and such was where his attention turned.

Maguire’s ambitions were substantial, and he borrowed a large sum of money, as well as securing matching funding from investors, for the purposes of launching his own videogame development company, Táintechn Creative Studios.²⁸ He designed several large-scale videogames, working with a small team to define all of the rules and mechanics, write all of the scripts, and develop many of the assets. With many of Táintechn’s designs completed, he approached the European arm of Sony Computer Entertainment, which responded positively, proposing to make Michael’s fledgling operation the first and only licensed PlayStation developer in Ireland. Maguire also secured a publishing contract with Ubisoft after personally meeting with the company’s cofounder, Yves Guillemot, at Tokyo’s Otani Hotel while attending a secret Sony reveal of the PS2’s technical specifications (see Fig. 3).



Figure 3. The Japanese rendition of the Táintechn business cards (company logo seen on the right) which Maguire brought to Tokyo for Sony’s invite-only PS2 developer reveal²⁹

At this event, Maguire was the “only Irish Guy in a room of the world’s most influential game developers”.³⁰ In addition to Táintechn’s commercial activities, while Maguire’s company was based at the Regional Development Centre in DKIT, he designed and managed research into video game development for higher-level education, laying the groundwork for the establishment of one of the discipline’s first programs in Ireland.³¹

While Maguire’s life on the stage had been forged in particularly local contexts, his career as a videogame writer matured in places like Los Angeles and San Francisco, interacting with the pioneers of the industry, many of whom would, unfortunately, fail to overcome the commercial realities of a hugely expensive mode of expression. Jonathan Clark, for example, was instrumental in the development of *Abuse*, one of the first mainstream platform shooters. Clark’s development studio, Crack dot Com, is indicative of the time in that its quest for innovation—in their case, the development of a first-person shooter / real-time strategy hybrid named *Golgotha*—was unrealised by the time the company went bankrupt (Clark 1998). Other influential figures to cross paths with Maguire include Andy Campbell and Michael Kane of Red Lemon Studios, the latter of which would go on to become an art director with Rockstar, working on their popular phenomenon, *Grand Theft Auto*. Back in Ireland, there were very few studios emerging to contend with Táintechn, but those who were involved in the industry throughout its beginnings included Dylan Collins, Tony Kelly, Malachy Duffin, Hugh Reynolds, and Steven Collins.³² The latter pair, Reynolds and Collins, founded Telekinesys Research—now better known as Havok, and central to some of the entertainment industry’s biggest titles—out of

the Computer Science department at Trinity College Dublin in 1998. The firm was acquired by Intel in 2007, and later, in 2015, by Microsoft, for undisclosed fees.

Based on the promise of existing and potential publishing deals, Táintechn continued to grow, though perhaps too quickly. At its height the studio employed twenty people, but delivering on such ambitious projects required an increasing volume of capital, and despite his efforts Maguire was unable to secure the funding³³ necessary to bring any of the studio's projects to commercial fruition. The reality of the financial landscape was that the return on investment was too low for the larger UK and US-based investment firms, and their Irish counterparts did not yet recognise the industry's potential nor significance of the aforementioned deals with Sony and Ubisoft. In January 2000, as people marked the beginning of the millennium which would play host to the digital age, Maguire closed the doors of Táintechn Creative Studios. The following month, his father Gerry passed away. After the closure of Táintechn, Maguire went to work for Microsoft Games Studios, appointed as a program manager with responsibilities for games development across both the Xbox and PC. He also served as the organisation's liaison to the emerging Irish videogame industry, where he continued to interact with many of the individuals who would go on to shape the sector in Ireland.

After Microsoft, Maguire went to work for Midas, where he was responsible for the establishment and facilitation of the Digital Media Cluster Development Program in the area of Creative Digital Media. Maguire left Midas to co-found DIME—Digital Interactive Media Enterprises / Dancing in Molecular Energy—alongside Louth businessman John McEneaney. DIME specialises in providing experimental and contemporary media production techniques to third-parties. They have developed 360 and transmedia content that has involved collaborations with people like William Simpson, a Northern Irish comic artist who became lead Storyboard Artist for HBO's popular television drama, *Game of Thrones*. Maguire has never returned to the videogame industry.

From the Playhouse to the Screen

The rise and fall of Táintechn has one major consequence that is of interest to this particular narrative: it largely drew Maguire away from his non-commercial creative practice, focusing him instead on the day-to-day operations of running a high-potential start-up in a blossoming tech sector. His theatrical career and the early multimodal experiments that emerged from the Travelling Hibernian Ensemble had been neglected for the best part of a decade while Maguire privileged his work in the gaming industry. In 2006, finally returning to his own creative practice, Maguire used Tiddlywiki—something of a predecessor to Twine—to create *Bob Casio's Dead Cameraman*. Returning to his origins, Maguire found that those artists interested in colliding literary and computational aesthetics were lacking a community of praxis from which their craft could benefit. This changed in early 2007, when five figures met in a Drogheda café to discuss the possibility of bringing some formal structure to Ireland's scattered community of e-lit artists: they were Garrett Weldon, Tom Madden, Conor Farnan, Claire Fitch, and Michael J. Maguire.³⁴ Weldon subsequently went on to stand in Louth as a People Before Profit candidate in the 2016 General Election.³⁵ A youth and community worker, he was eliminated on the ninth count. The remaining attendees, Madden, Farnan, Fitch, and Maguire, all have connections to academia, as does Ronan Lynch, who, while not at the Drogheda gathering, participated in a number of informal discussions with the group. Considering that five of these six

individuals hold doctorates, the relationship between scholarship and practice that one sees in larger international bodies like the ELO is evidently replicated in local contexts. In 2008, the aforementioned exchanges bore some fruit, when Maguire founded the Irish Electronic Literature Community, a non-profit voluntary group concerned with the promotion of electronic literature throughout Ireland.

It was in this same year that Maguire published “Promise: The Annals of the Four Webmasters” in *The New River* (Maguire 2008), a journal of digital writing and art, largely considered to be one of the first online journals dedicated exclusively to the publication of electronic literature.³⁶ As a work of Irish e-lit, “Promise” (see Fig. 4) was more than its authorship—steeped in Irish symbolism, it was one of the form’s first works to truly be *of* Ireland.

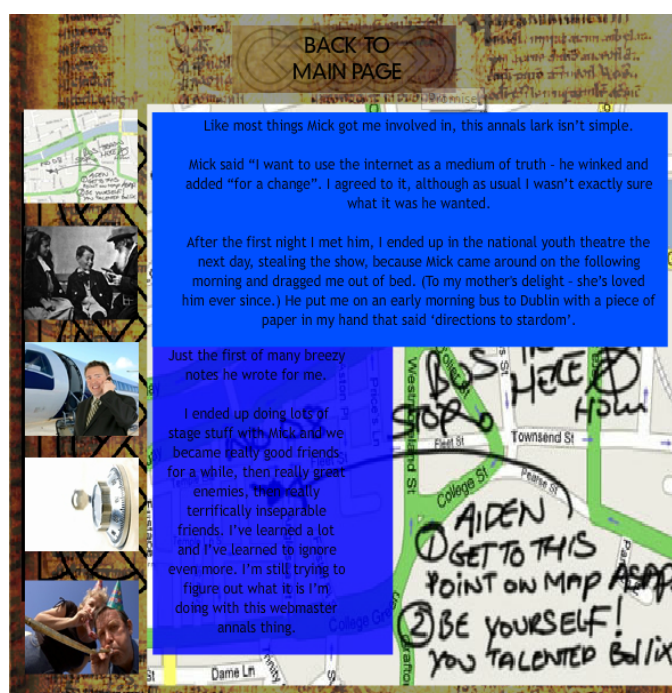


Figure 4. Michael J. Maguire's “Promise”, published in *The New River* (Maguire 2008)

Formation of the Irish Electronic Literature Community, coupled with the appearance of Maguire’s work in major publications, saw Phillippe Bootz, renowned scholar-practitioner based in France, invite his Irish counterpart to Digital Digital Digital Littérature, a European Network of Digital Literature, convened in October 2011. Twelve months prior, at the Transliteracy conference in Leicester, Maguire had presented *Cameltext* alongside major figures like Christine Wilks and Steve Gibson (“Transliteracy Conference 2010” 2013). As we entered the present decade, electronic literature in Ireland finally had a practitioner who had arrived on the international scene.

While Maguire continued to build domestic capacity, across in the United States, Mairéad Byrne was making a pedagogical contribution to the growth of the field. Having graduated from University College Dublin and Trinity College Dublin, Byrne worked as a journalist, playwright, and gallery manager; she also served as Director of Limerick’s Belltable Arts Centre, a multi-disciplinary initiative opened in 1981. Byrne emigrated to the United States in 1994, just as the Web was beginning domestic saturation, a cultural upheaval which coincided with Byrne taking an MA in American Poetry and Creative Writing at Purdue University, where she also wrote her

PhD thesis on theories of metaphor. After a brief spell at the University of Mississippi, she began teaching at the Rhode Island School of Design, where she is now Professor of Poetry and Poetics. Incidentally, the aforementioned Samantha Gorman taught at Byrne's institution for a short period, the *Kells* author listing the latter as a key influence on her professional development.³⁷ As a creative writer, Byrne has largely been concerned with print, but there is some relevant cross-pollination, nonetheless: her first poetry collection, *Nelson & The Huruburu Bird* (2003), was published by Wild Honey, the Wicklow-based press also responsible for the aforementioned texts by Geoffrey Squires. In the same year, Byrne began teaching Digital Poetics, one of a range of interdisciplinary courses she developed with an emphasis on multimodal writing. Byrne's contributions are not trivial—it is significant that an Irish scholar played a role in the formalisation of e-lit pedagogy at a time when American institutions were increasingly turning towards the digital as a means of constructing the literary.

Electronic literature operates as something of a creative juncture, a form that attracts individuals who enjoy blending the freedom of words with the constraints of code. Most of the practitioners, and indeed the critics, who are drawn to this domain hail from diverse creative and critical backgrounds, a generalisation that appears to hold true in the Irish situation: Maguire once described himself as something of “an electronic quill for hire” (Maguire 2015), and like Byrne, has experience in a range of activities including professional writing and theatre. Claire Fitch has over twenty years of experience working in composition and performance, as well as in computing and game development. Conor Farnan is both a Joyce and Durcan scholar, but also a poet who has seen his work included in some of Ireland's most prestigious venues, such as *The Stinging Fly* and *The SHOp*. They are scholars and they are practitioners, multidisciplinary by their very nature—considered in this light, it is little wonder that they have been drawn to multimodality. The evident centrality of theatre to Ireland's e-lit community is curious: Maguire, Byrne, and Madden have all engaged with the stage as practitioners,³⁸ be it as playwrights or performers. For Maguire, there has always been a conscious coupling of the stage and screen, as evidenced by *Huckleberry Finnegans Wake*, a combinatory performance piece in which he played a major role (Memmott et al. 2013).

Theatre is, in part, the performance of literature, and thus shares many fundamentals with combinatory aesthetics: the processes through which text emerges, the products of this textual construction, and the reception of these products by audiences. Underlying similarities aside, the *performance* of a work of literature is inherently transformative, and the transaction between author and reader is profoundly influenced by this act of mediation. Literary performance is not the exclusive reserve of the stage—any reading might contain theatrics—but histrionics assume a more vital role in a staged production. It is in this respect that theatre is very much concerned with mediation and its craft; there is an appreciation of the vehicles of artistic delivery which is shared by the creator of electronic literature, whose content is wrapped, packaged—staged—as multimodal assemblages that unravel within narrative spaces incorporating words, visuals, sound, and—increasingly with augmented and virtual reality—gesture.

Beyond performance, stagecraft is essentially collaborative, considerably more so than most other literary forms; electronic literature is similarly collaborative, emerging from interactions between authors and developers, software coders and text constructors. It would be wrong to suggest a dichotomy between art and code, and indeed, there are many practitioners in this field who possess both literary and

technical acumen, but I would contend that, in many cases, the writer is not the only contributor of note. For all the freedoms of literary expression, the page can be a very confined space—considered in such a light, it is perhaps unsurprising that Ireland’s e-lit community has attracted individuals from the aesthetic amalgam and participatory ethos of the playhouse to that of the screen. In this sense, electronic literature is the space for a handful of people on this island who have had long and essentially *diverse* artistic backgrounds.

Notwithstanding the limitations noted earlier in this article—the fact that the idea of a “community” lends itself to myopic histories—the contribution of Michael Maguire to electronic literature in Ireland should not be understated. To take a personal anecdote, a few years ago I had the good fortune of attending *Pathfinders: 25 years of Experimental Literary Art*, an exhibit hosted at the Modern Language Association’s annual convention in Chicago (Grigar and Moulthrop 2014). It was the first time that I had the pleasure of meeting many of the Electronic Literature Organisation’s major figures, all of whom spoke highly of Michael Maguire—this may seem trivial, but it demonstrates his contributions towards the international reputation of our national practice. Electronic literature has not had many champions on this island: Maguire’s colleagues from the Drogheda meeting, the few emerging practitioners I’ve already noted, practitioners in the games industry who might call what they do something else, scholars working in predominantly critical capacities, the most prolific of which is arguably Anne Karhio. The point that I am making here is simple: Maguire was, for a long time, Irish e-lit’s only representative, and whatever small community we now have owes a considerable debt to his pioneering efforts—to borrow from Grigar and Moulthrop—as I often do—*Michael Maguire is Ireland’s pathfinder*.

When we assess Maguire’s contributions to the field, we need to look beyond what he did as an instigator: not only did he start a network that continues to grow, but he also produced some creative pieces that need to be appreciated in the context of their day. In many of his pieces, particularly, in the illusory figure of John Pat McNamara—an avatar which Maguire created and successfully presented as a prodigious creator of Irish e-lit (Maguire 2013)—we see how he revived the traditions of the high modernists, creating a literary jigsaw comprised of seen and unseen forces. Such is what the screen affords, a chance for the seen and unseen to interact with more function and purpose, the personification of which is John Pat McNamara and all of the constantly reformed assumptions he represents. This is what literature has always been, in that readers progress with assumed semantics and frameworks that can suddenly be disrupted, and disrupted again, and in different ways, each time a reading reoccurs—the screen gives the author a different kind of control over that disruption, perhaps even *more* control. Speaking about McNamara, Maguire explains:

I took that idea of a dead poet, a live commentator, a body of work that told the story of not only the narrator and commentator, but also the poet himself and the poet that told another kind of narrative entirely, a parallel narrative. I took those ideas and I inverted them and what you end up with is you end up with a live poet, a dead commentator, hidden narratives in the form of the country narrative that appears in the HTML of the pages; there is a counter narrative within most of the works as well. And the whole thing is a complete lie as all fiction is. (Maguire 2015)

The dynamics to which Maguire points have parallels in print predecessors like Nabokov, but also hypertextual pioneers like the Eastgate School's Michael Joyce—Maguire took all of these, smashed them together, and made them Irish.

In recent years, Maguire has gravitated back towards scholarship. While his students and peers have benefited from his contributions in this regard, it is with a measure of regret that one considers what might have been had he been positioned to operate exclusively as a digital writer/author/artist/developer, equipped with the resources necessary to make a real creative contribution to the form's contemporary moment. The possibilities for electronic literature, so aesthetically attached to computation, shift by the decade, if not in even shorter terms. Who knows what Maguire would be doing now had he chosen to engage with his creative practice in a full-time capacity? What we do know is that he laid the foundations for what is becoming our national e-lit canon, bringing the conventions of the wider movement to Irish subjects and symbolisms.

Electronic Futures in Ireland

As with Maguire's career in the video games industry, it was beyond Irish shores that he first encountered those influences that would push him towards electronic literature. Unable to find any relevant activity in his own artistic circles, Maguire looked to Nottingham Trent University, where he took inspiration from Sue Thomas' trAce Online Writing Centre.³⁹ Nottingham is also where he first encountered Talan Memmot's *Lexia to Perplexia*, which he cites as one of his greatest influences.⁴⁰ Maguire points to theories emanating from "France, Germany, North America and the UK" when asked about his influencers, though he also recognises the danger of thinking in terms of community, stating that, realistically, "the potential for what we today might call the e-lit community has only been around since the early to mid-nineteen nineties".⁴¹ When speaking of his national contemporaries, Maguire mentions some of his fellow instigators from the earliest days of the Irish Electronic Literature Community. These people include Fitch, "who has a twenty-five year plus history of composition, performance, concerts and computers, a decade of game development experience but only in the last seven or eight years has she deliberately classified some of her output and collaborative work as 'electronic literature'", and Madden, "who is a life-long theatre practitioner but has in the last five years seen the genuine potential in our emerging field".⁴²

The future of electronic literature in Ireland does not seem as bright as it might be. The essential networks through which practices mature have not yet emerged in earnest, and while there are some positive signs, as signalled by the rise of the "poetry films / film poems" and the relative success and popularity of Graham Allen's *Holes* (O'Sullivan 2017a), e-lit remains on the periphery of Ireland's literary scene. What has changed, however, is the academic context, wherein many Irish institutions—my own included⁴³—are now beginning to support programs which teach subjects like electronic literature and literary gaming. Maguire was again central to this turn, completing one of the country's first doctorates in electronic literature (Maguire 2014).⁴⁴ As electronic literature becomes increasingly normalised across Ireland's institutes of education, a growing number of students and scholars will be drawn to its affordances—as a new generation are taught how to read and write multimodal forms, its significance within the canon will be enhanced.

Electronic literature will dominate or replace print forms, but rather, it will become more than other. And it is important that educators continue to support this

change, because electronic literature is precisely what the new generation *are already reading*: just look at the popular appeal of *literary* titles like *Dear Esther* and *All the Delicate Duplicates* (O’Sullivan 2017b). Print and multimodal forms need to co-exist pedagogically if future readers are to possess the diverse critical appreciation necessary to see literatures where they were once trained to see literature, and thankfully, this would seem to be the case at many Irish universities. The relationship between scholarship and practice, so essential to the international e-lit movement, needs to be sustained if Ireland’s fledgling community is to flourish.

Beyond Ireland’s academies, there needs to be greater synthesis between those who would consider themselves digital authors, and those who feel that they belong to the games industry. About a decade before the meeting in Drogheda, Maguire recalls a group of game developers coalescing at a pub in Slane to discuss the idea of a national consortium being formed, an undertaking which was largely successful, and would prove hugely beneficial to Ireland’s domestic video game industry. The history of that particular movement, which would go on to become associated with the International Game Developers Association, is beyond the scope of this paper⁴⁵—the issue of relevance is that there are kindred communities of practice in Ireland existing as though they are disparate. But perhaps that’s the way it should be, and I am wrong to conflate where I should merely point to crossover—perhaps the obsession with “community” is needless, after all. Furthermore, the gaming industry is, to a degree, driven by commercial interests, and while the ideal is that e-lit authors will be equally positioned to commodify their own work in the future, the reality is that many still operate too much in the realm of experimentation. The inability of *most* e-lit artists—there are a few notable exceptions—to commercialise their creative outputs may be a contributing factor to the extremely high ratio of scholar-practitioners in the field. This is not to say that video game developers are motivated by commercial interests, but rather, that it would be difficult to harmonise these dissonant groups when, to isolate a natural tension, there exists for one, and not the other, very real commercial considerations.

It is disappointing that juxtapositions between the electronic and the literary remain a rarity within the Irish canon, but the future holds more promise than the past.⁴⁶ If we list those factors that have contributed to Ireland’s lack of e-lit, the major restraints might include the absence of artistic networks, individual expertise, and institutional support.⁴⁷ The first two barriers are somewhat commutative, in that, should an author wish to avail of computational aesthetics, they require the technical expertise necessary to realise their artistic vision—in the absence of relevant networks, finding collaborators for such work can prove challenging. Furthermore, some writers might not wish to pursue collaborative solutions, intent instead on retaining sole authorship—however one thinks of “authorship” in the realm of electronic literature—an ambition that requires substantial investment in the development of the prerequisite computational techne. If one is to create electronic literature, they need to speak two languages, one of which will be the code necessary to instruct the machine. That Ireland’s literary community has largely relied on computers for remediation or the disseminative value of social media platforms suggests that authors either do not want to experiment with computation, or do not really know how.

Teaching everyone how to code is not the answer to our canon’s e-lit problem. Instead, we need to ensure that the resources are in place so that any authors who do want to explore the affordances of the screen beyond Facebook and YouTube can be assisted in doing so. Institutional support for such measures is not commonplace,

though many of the major bodies charged with developing Ireland's literary cultures are faced with resource constraints. Many third-level institutions have shown progress, supporting educators and student cohorts who wish to see electronic literature form part of their curricula, but universities are siloes, and if Ireland is ever to have a vibrant community of e-lit practitioners, we need to better support that community at a grassroots level. Perhaps Ireland does not need such a community, or perhaps we already have one.

Whatever the future of electronic literature in Ireland, there is a past and there is a present, and there can be no treatment of our past or consideration of our present without acknowledging the work of Michael J. Maguire, those other contributors mentioned throughout this essay, and indeed, the many pioneers whose stories undoubtedly exist, but are unaccounted for because their work is yet to be discovered for a myriad of institutional, scholarly, or practical reasons. But as noted at the beginning of this essay, my hope is that this will be just one of many contributions to what will soon be a far richer literary history of our field.

Further Resources

Bibliography of critical writings related to electronic literature in Ireland

<https://www.zotero.org/groups/irishelit>

ELMCIP Electronic Literature in Ireland Research Collection (curated by Anne Karhio)

<https://elmcip.net/research-collection/electronic-literature-ireland-research-collection>

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Notes

¹ There is much existing scholarship providing evidence for this claim. See, for example, many of the entries in the *Irish University Review's* issue on "[Irish Experimental Poetry](#)" (Lloyd 2016), Ian R. Walsh's treatment of the Irish theatre scene (2012), or rather, a more wide-ranging study of modern and contemporary Irish literature, such as that by Declan Kiberd (2009).

² Readers unfamiliar with electronic literature might want to see "Electronic Literature: Contexts & Poetics" (Heckman and O'Sullivan 2018), or *Electronic Literature* (2008) and "[Electronic Literature: What is it?](#)" (2007), both by N. Katherine Hayles. Typically, "electronic literature" refers to literary works with an inherent computational element, generally excluding works which have just been digitally recorded or remediated for disseminative purposes.

³ In an earlier draft of this essay I had used the word "tradition" instead of community. Anne Karhio, cited at various junctures throughout, suggested that it is possibly too early to speak of Ireland's e-lit tradition, a point well made, and a provocation I think well worth noting.

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- ⁴ The use of “westernised” in place of Anglocentric is intentional, as the Electronic Literature Organization’s range of activities and representations is increasingly multilingual.
- ⁵ I recognise the danger in exclusionary constructs like “community”, but it is a necessary evil in the treatment of localised movements.
- ⁶ There have been some notable exceptions to this, including digital projects like *Pathfinders* (Grigar and Moulthrop 2015), *I ♥ E-Poetry* (Flores n.d.), and *Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice (ELMCIP)*. Additionally, readers seeking electronic literature’s origin story would be well served by a number of critical texts (C. Funkhouser 2007; C. T. Funkhouser 2007; di Rosario 2011; Moulthrop and Grigar 2017).
- ⁷ The contributions of Jeneen Naji and Anne Karhio to e-lit scholarship in Ireland should be recognised: Naji invited Dene Grigar to Maynooth University in 2014 to guest curate *Moving Words*, possibly the first exhibition of electronic literature to be hosted in Ireland. It was hosted at the institution’s Illuminations gallery, where, more recently, mix-media pieces by Doireann Ní Ghríofa have also been showcased. Anne Karhio organised one of the island’s first conferences focused on digital literatures: *Other Codes / Cóid Eile: Digital Literatures in Context*, hosted in May 2017 at the National University of Ireland, Galway as part of their Galway Digital Cultures Initiative.
- ⁸ With thanks to Joe Tabbi for prompting this interpretation over some whiskey on a very cold night in Chicago.
- ⁹ International readers unfamiliar with these events can find more information at <http://www.obheal.ie> and <https://www.munsterlit.ie/>; the latter resource, in particular, provides an unrivalled snapshot of the literary community’s activities in the wider Munster region, particularly Cork city.
- ¹⁰ *Holes*, which is updated on a weekly basis, can be read at <http://holesbygrahamallen.org/>.
- ¹¹ With thanks to Máire Logue, Listowel Writers’ Week, for sourcing this reference for me.
- ¹² Personal correspondence with Michael Joyce.
- ¹³ Like *Holes*, *Remembering the Dead: Northern Ireland* has been published by New Binary Press, and can be viewed at <http://remembering.newbinarypress.com/>.
- ¹⁴ Personal correspondence with Samantha Gorman.
- ¹⁵ Personal correspondence with Samantha Gorman.
- ¹⁶ Personal correspondence with Samantha Gorman.
- ¹⁷ Personal correspondence with Samantha Gorman.
- ¹⁸ Personal correspondence with Samantha Gorman.
- ¹⁹ “The Abbey” refers to the Abbey Theatre, considered the National Theatre of Ireland. Mac Anna served in numerous capacities at the Abbey, most notably as its three-term Artistic Director.
- ²⁰ Image sourced through personal correspondence with Michael J. Maguire.
- ²¹ Image sourced through personal correspondence with Michael J. Maguire.
- ²² Personal correspondence with Michael J. Maguire.
- ²³ Personal correspondence with Michael J. Maguire.
- ²⁴ International readers might benefit from some context here: republicanism in Ireland generally refers to pro-nationalist, anti-colonial ideologies and sentiments.
- ²⁵ Personal correspondence with Michael J. Maguire.
- ²⁶ Maguire had an Access Community Drama script accepted for production, with the date for filming set, until external pressures resulted in RTE shelving the series because of its amateur status.
- ²⁷ Personal correspondence with Michael J. Maguire.
- ²⁸ “The Táin” is an early Irish epic which tells of Medb and Ailill mac Máta, the king and queen of Connacht, who plot to capture the mythological bull Donn Cúailnge from Ulster, but are opposed by Cúchulainn. Dundalk is steeped in Irish mythology and folklore, and the Táintechn studios were based in Muirhevnamor, site of one of the Táin’s largest battles.
- ²⁹ Image sourced through personal correspondence with Michael J. Maguire.
- ³⁰ Personal correspondence with Michael J. Maguire.
- ³¹ Personal correspondence with Michael J. Maguire.
- ³² Personal correspondence with Michael J. Maguire.
- ³³ Táintechn already had substantial funding from publishers like Ubisoft, the issue was that no Irish backers understood this emerging market and were unprepared to provide the matching funds required.
- ³⁴ I would like to thank Michael for his contributions to this article. Michael and I first met in Dublin in December 2015, having corresponded for several years prior. Michael has always been very generous with his time and knowledge, and we have maintained a continuous stream of e-mail exchanges from which I have garnered a great deal about e-lit on this island.
- ³⁵ This is Ireland’s primary election, wherein public representatives seek seats within the national parliament.

³⁶ Currently hosted by the Collaboratory for Digital Discourse and Culture at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, *The New River* remains an active periodical which has drawn submissions from some of the field's most distinguished practitioners. It was founded in 1996 by Ed Falco.

³⁷ Personal correspondence with Samantha Gorman.

³⁸ This relationship between the theatre and computers is explored in far greater detail by Brenda Laurel in *Computers as Theatre* (Laurel 2013).

³⁹ For more on the trAce Online Writing Centre, see: <http://jacket2.org/commentary/traces-trace-online-writing-centre-1995-2005> (Carpenter n.d.). The trAce works are to be archived by the ELO at some point in the future: <http://eliterature.org/trace-online-writing-centre-archives/>.

⁴⁰ Personal correspondence with Michael J. Maguire.

⁴¹ Personal correspondence with Michael J. Maguire.

⁴² Personal correspondence with Michael J. Maguire.

⁴³ In July 2019, the ELO's annual conference and media arts festival will be hosted by University College Cork, the event's first time taking place on Irish shores. Undergraduates at UCC are also able to take a module in Electronic Literature / Literary Games.

⁴⁴ Jeneen Naji completed her doctoral dissertation on electronic literature at Dublin City University in 2012. I am sure that there are others which pre-date those theses completed by Naji and Maguire.

⁴⁵ Readers interested in Ireland's video game industry would be well served by the work of Aphra Kerr and Anthony Cawley (Kerr 2012, 2016; Kerr and Cawley 2009, 2012).

⁴⁶ I can assure international readers that promising futures are not always a given in Irish society.

⁴⁷ This summer, *novelling* (Luers, Smith, Dean 2016) received the Robert Coover Award for a Work of Electronic Literature, one of the most prestigious international prizes for electronic literature. Published by my own New Binary Press, the Irish literary community and press did little to acknowledge the announcement.