MLA 2012 "Electronic Literature:  Toward a Mobile and Geolocative Aesthetic
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"Some of the most effective forms of Electronic Writing are INCREDIBLY SIMPLE to create," declares e-lit critic/poet/curator and UCLA professor Brian Kim Stefans. Creative use of simple platforms is one hallmark of the geolocative e-lit selected for this exhibit.  Selected mobile works, by contrast, are authored in complex blends of computational languages.  This makes for an interesting contrast.  Artists working in social media platforms like Twitter and Google Maps seek to discover whether those platforms that permit interactivity can retain narrative qualities even as the "literary" becomes participatory.  Artists working in the iOS--Apple's mobile operating system--are seeking to discover the narrative potentialities of touch interface: how might it affect game play, interactivity, plotting, the mode of multi-sensory input?   Although mobile and geolocative share themes and contexts, the authoring systems lead artists to explore different characteristics of story.

What is "literary" in geolocative and mobile e-lit?  Which characteristics, if any, do they they share?  Twitterfiction is a good place to begin answering such questions.  Twitter and the iOS were hatched within nine months of each other; Twitter's capacity for immediacy makes it an ideal authoring platform in mobile environments.  And yet three recent Twitterfics by established e-lit authors aren't especially "mobile": they read just as well on a desktop.  Jay Bushman's #SXStarWars (a real-time Twitter re-enactment of the attack on the Death Star), Rob Wittig's "netprov" *Grace, Wit and Charm* and Mark Marino's *The Ballad of Workstudy Seth* reveal Twitter's extravagant hospitality to dramatic irony, but nothing new about mobility.

We curators began last June with a set of texts and questions.  What constitutes the "literary" in mobile net art?  Does "mobile" e-lit have to run on a mobile device? (Yes.) What if mobile is required for authoring but the piece doesn't run on mobile? (Depends.) These questions and many others animated a lengthy Google doc.  We created a "geolocative" category to gather works that hyperlocate stories and require use of mobile devices to post or gain access to  them.

Touch--whether from a human fingertip or its GUI approximate in a browser--is the primary mode of navigation in mobile and geolocative e-lit.  Touch interface may seem "invisible" because it's a proprioceptive extension of our bodies.  But touch is more than a navigational gesture; it becomes a *vernacular*--a *touch vernacular*, I argue--when tactile navigation becomes expressive: not just accessing the story but interactively constituting it.

Erik Loyer's *Strange Rain* on the Apple iOS yields an experience that demonstrates the narrative complexity that can arise when touch is treated as a narrative element capable of nuance, mood and layering much the way we think of sound.  Both *Strange Rain* and the previous year's *Ruben and Lullaby* are featured in the mobile works exhibit.  Synesthetic,

narratively rich because multi-sensory and choreographed both to frame text and stand alone, *Strange Rain* is the best example I've found yet of the multimodal sense/text recursive loop that augments narrative possibility beyond the familiar dyad of sight/ sound.  Unlike Loyer's gorgeous but less compelling *Ruben and Lullaby*, which eschews text for drawn, interactive facial expressions to propel the arguing lovers' narrative, *Strange Rain* is as much a puzzle as it is a sensory experience.  Loyer calls his works "stories you can play," and indeed, the tension between the narrative and ludic elements pull the reader/gamer in opposite directions.  Games urge us to move quickly, to "level up." Narrative enjoins us to slow down and feel.  *Strange Rain* approximates synesthesia when the reader/gamer oscillates quickly between those two modes of interaction.  It's a splendid disorientation.

Jörg Piringer's *abcedfghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz* is a canny app that features crisp sound recordings of each letter.  Activated by touch, these letter-sounds bounce, fly, drop and putter around the screen in any combination a gamer can create through touch. Endlessly imaginative, this game has no narrative element; but the play is so inspired it causes us to hear--for the first time in how long?--the sonic building blocks of language.  Piringer's defamiliarization creates a surprising range of euphony and cacophony.  He is a member of Vienna's legendary [Vegetable Orchestra](#).

Silent and stark in black-and-white silhouettes, Aya Karpinska's *Shadows Never Sleep* withholds the sonic and tactile gratifications of works by Piringer and Loyer.  Karpinska's play with children's nursery rhymes and bedtime stories casts the scary "shadows" as text itself, to which the reader has to "zoom" with her fingers in order to gain access.  These beautiful text panes are the creatures under your bed.  In P.o.E.M.M., the reader glides her finger atop the mobile screen and lines of poetry spring up and trail behind, sometimes right-side up and sometimes backwards.  The app features poems by luminaries David Jhave Johnston, Jim Andrews, J. R. Carpenter, Aya Karpinska, and platform co-creator Jason Lewis on the theme of "what they speak."

Evan Young's *The Carrier*, like the comic books his story remediates, is an app that distributes story serially.  Chapter delivery is synchronized to the timestamp within the novel and corresponds to equivalent intervals of time in the reader's daily world.  Ancillary media, such as recipes, pictures, news stories, weather reports and maps, are pushed to the reader via email as further reinforcement of the blend between the fictive and actual worlds.

Where mobile works are instantly summoned at the touch of your finger, geolocative works wander beneath it.  A reading experience of geolocated works is desultory, a loopy departure from the precision and focus of a mobile app.  Geolocated e-lit floats above the map.  The lexia only look anchored by those animated blue pins.  What seems on the surface like plentitude is actually synecdochal.

One short video--on display in our exhibit--is almost all that remains of the first locative media experience, Jeremy Hight's *34 West, 118 North*, a walk through a patch Los Angeles where "sonic ghosts of another era" relay the story of the railroad industry in

downtown L.A.  In Kate Armstrong's *Ping*, participants receive directions culled from a telephone tree about where to go next: "the effects of the environment on the perception, behaviour and mood of individuals" is under study here.  Four other projects not included in this exhibit continue in the vein of Armstrong's pioneering work in the psychogeographical:  Blast Theory's [Rider Spoke](#), Paul Notzold's [Speak to God](#) and Bluebrain's two first-ever location-aware albums *[Listen to the Light](#)* (Oct. 2011; set in Central Park) and *[The National Mall](#)* (April 2011).  In each case, *in situ* experience is elemental to the art.  In Teri Raub's *Core Sample*, featured in this exhibit, a GPS-based interactive sound walk puts the soundscapes of Boston's Institute for Contemporary Art in dialog with the landscape of Spectacle Island and asks "what is recorded versus what is suppressed and denied?"

Most of the geolocative works featured in this show are nonfiction (or, in Hight's case, a variation on history). The fictional *L.A. Flood* plays out in a realistically-paced, 6-day flood simulation tweeted by over seventy characters who are coping (or not) with the flood's incursions.  Real-time interactivity via Twitter and at live events *in situ* drives the narrative's development.  Created in 2007, the *L.A. Flood* hosts 59 characters dispersed around the city; the story map has been visited over 20,000 times.  During installations, QR codes pasted to the exact physical sites around the University of Southern California permit people to pull stories *in situ* and respond via the #LAflood twitterfic.  The cognitive dissonance between the fictive world and the famously cloudless blue skies highlight's *L.A. Flood's* willing break from the verisimilar.  Aristotelian unities of time, space, and action are all here in *L.A. Flood;* they give readers a toehold in the sprawling narrative.  But that toehold erodes as the river of lexia flows from the map and the Twitterfeed.  Hypertextual fault lines judder *L.A. Flood's* realistic façade.

"Pursue error & failure, exploit autocorrect, disturb the placid surface of interface that deceives us into believing in unshakable humanness," exhorts [Lori Emerson](#), guest-tweeting on [Mark Amerika](#)'s @remixthebook.  Amerika, an e-lit author since the early days of hypertext, shot the first feature-length film on a mobile phone: *Immobilité* is on view in our mobile exhibit.  From Amerika's "foreign" film to the next generation of mobile and geolocative elit student authors featured in our gallery: the history of innovation writes and rewrites itself on a palimpsest you can swipe.