

# Episode 2: Joseph Tabbi on the Electronic Book Review, Research Infrastructure, and Electronic Literature

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*CDN Director Scott Rettberg and the Center's Principle Investigator Joseph Tabbi discuss the decades-long development of a born-digital, community based publication. The Electronic Book Review brings together literary scholars and conceptual artists from a widening set of disciplines and geographical regions. While foregrounding critical discourse, the journal will bring to our readership the sorts of activities that we'll be featuring in our e-lit node: activities which we designate as a Publishing And Infrastructure Group (PAIG). As our readers pick up on things that our authors have written, they too become an active part of our discursive community. Debates and dialogues are thus the order of the day, as authors and audiences begin to merge.*

**SR:** Welcome to Off Center, the podcast about digital narrative. My name is Scott Rettberg. I'm the director of the Center for Digital Narrative at the University of Bergen in Norway. Today I'm joined with Joe Tabbi. Hi, Joe.

**JT:** Scott, hi.

**SR:** Joe is a Professor of English at the University of Bergen, and he's leading the Electronic Literature node at the Center. Just maybe to say a little bit about your background before we begin, Joe, you have what I would say is a fascinating and diverse background as a researcher, scholar, and publisher, which we'll be talking quite a bit about, of digital and print literature. And your work going back includes a lot of books, which is fairly rare, I guess, among the electronic literature community. But you started out writing about postmodern American literature and media ecology. You've done a biography of the work and life of novelist William Gaddis, and a new book on literary posthumanism. And what we're mostly going to be talking about today is your work in two other modes: the *Electronic Book Review*, which is an open access journal that began back in the 1990s, and also your work with the

Electronic Literature Organization and your critical work—and about the research infrastructure of electronic literature—now for more than two decades. Welcome. And maybe we could start by talking about the *Electronic Book Review*.

**JT:** We can do that, yes. And I just want to say that all of those elements, the print and the digital, keeping them together is really one of the things EBR does. And that's something that I think the electronic literature field needs to do. It's just more interesting when you're talking about things that happened long ago in literature and how they have changed or maybe they are coming back now.

**SR:** Yeah. And I guess you're a scholar of contemporary literature, but if we think about contemporary now, it moves on a sort of different time span with electronic literature. That's sort of the speed of the Internet.

**JT:** Yeah. And contemporary is kind of gone. I just finished this introduction to literary posthumanism, so all of the humanistic elements are not necessarily going to continue, whereas many of the things that were before humanism, like epic literature, for example, it is entirely possible that in e-lit, the epic will be more important than the novel.

**SR:** I heard one researcher refer to the Gutenberg parentheses. This sort of idea that print culture, print publication and literature around print was sort of a parenthetical moment in the history of narrative and the history of storytelling.

**JT:** Yeah, it could well be. And that's one narrative that we might follow for the next ten years and kind of see if that's where it's going, if it's a parenthesis, or if the humanism is just becoming stricter and more unwilling to move. And then it becomes what I would call transhumanism, where we just empower the human more and more. And you see where that gets us.

**SR:** And of course, eventually we're going to be talking about computer programs that are writing literature. So, of course, we've truly reached the posthuman moment in literature when some of the text is actually produced by AI. Let's come back to that later. Now, this is something we're doing a lot of talking about in the Center, but let's talk first about EBR and how it began back in, I guess, the mid-90s.

**JT:** Well, let's see. It was the year that I moved to Chicago, and that was right after I did a seminar, a workshop with Kate Hayles. What year was that?

**SR:** 95?

**JT:** I think 94, 95. Yes. In that seminar with Hayles, there were already three or four artists who were working in electronic literature, literary artists doing that. So as I began the work on literary postmodernism, that was my field, that got me the job in Chicago, I was also talking about this other current movement.

**SR:** And this was really pretty close to the launch of the first Web browsers, if I recall correctly. So what was that moment for you when you saw the World Wide Web and began to rethink what you could do with it?

**JT:** As a literary scholar, I would say that the Hayles workshop was it because I would see Stephanie Strickland and Marjorie Luesebrink after all of our formal sessions, actually making some work in the other room where that was getting done. And it was the first experience I had of being in a scholarly domain but participating in active making or observing that and to some extent, writing about it.

**SR:** So that sort of interface between the creative workers, the creative authors and the critics where they were sort of sitting together in the same room and participating in each other's processes and talking about the work.

**JT:** That was the definitive difference. And of course, there was a lot that we were all learning. We didn't all know the technology, the IT behind it. That could be learned. And it was. And also you learned how to make sure that the things you don't know, you're collaborating with someone who does.

**SR:** Now, I think it is important to note that EBR was one of the first open access journals, that it was sort of built around this idea that you didn't need a subscription, that you didn't even necessarily need to be someone who's formally a scholar to engage with this work.

**JT:** Yeah. And just now they're having open access publications where the peer review is also accessible. So that's a really strict version of the peer review process. Bring it in to a more general availability and everybody can be a peer reviewer. I don't think it will work. Personally.

**SR:** Crowd peer review?

**JT:** Yeah. Crowd peer review. But if it does work, then we have a paradigm shift.

**SR:** There's a lot of things that are, as I think about it, that are innovative or somewhat unique to the model of EBR. Rather than peer review formally, you sort of have this peer-to-peer review, a different model of peer review. You also have the model of publication that's not sort of blocked off into issues that come out, say, once every quarter. Why is that? Why do you think that's important that the publications come out as they're done?

**JT:** That the publications come—

**SR:** —of the individual essays and reviews and so forth on EBR, rather than having this sort of fixed model of like it comes out once a quarter or twice a year, that it's sort of on this ongoing, rolling basis.

**JT:** That's how writing works, when it works. And if it can come out when it's done and when the author and the publishers are ready, without having to follow the quarterly or yearly or book model, then it becomes more part of the everyday and it becomes something more like the experience that the bards had in epic time, to go back to that model. Because they weren't scheduling things quarterly or by some arbitrary date. They were scheduling things by where they were traveling in a given moment and what they were writing about or heard and were able to memorize and make variations on when they get to the next town.

**SR:** And this is another thing that the bards, I guess, to continue the metaphor, would change their story on the basis of who they encountered. And I think community is something I also think about with EBR. And not only community in the sense of people gathering together, but also the sort of discursive community—that what you see in EBR is often discourse. People pick up on things that other people have written, people come in and debate, and you have this idea of the riposte or riPOSTe.

**JT:** Yeah. And the POST is all in caps because you're posting that tough response and that harshness, it's being posted.

**SR:** Kind of a nice harshness though.

**JT:** Yeah. If you've got Kate Hayles' riPOSTing and even somewhat attacking, then that can make your work noticeable.

**SR:** Yeah. I think back to sort of a defining thing for the fields of game studies and electronic literature was this cybertext debate when you mentioned Kate Hayles with this sort of debate with Markku Eskelinen about whether we should be thinking about games and game studies from a sort of narrative or literary perspective. And that really, in a way, that sort of opened up this whole field of game studies.

**JT:** Yeah.

**SR:** So I think something that's really important about the *Electronic Book Review* is that it is this space of debate, of discourse. Another thing that's interesting that I'd like to ask you about with EBR is it seems to appeal to multiple fields. Certainly it became one of the principal loci of electronic literature criticism. But also you have that alongside debates about the environment, about media ecology, about constrained writing. How do you think it's sort of bringing these fields together and giving us new ways of comparing and contrasting and pulling ideas from them—

**JT:** By extending our communities, to go back to that theme. And collaborating. That's the way it will happen and needs to happen. And if it doesn't happen, then you haven't supplanted print or taken it to places where print is unable to go. You need to have people in different fields articulating what they're doing and how a field that is emerging differs from

what's possible in print, how it's better. And if in some cases it's not better. That's where the critical component, critical communities, the two Cs, that's what one gets with EBR when it's working.

**SR:** Yeah, and I do think that it's been one of these places that really did expand the reach and the community of electronic literature. So for example, I know people like Steve Tomasula, an experimental novelist, or Lance Olsen. I see their work, they our work. We sort of have this experimental tradition in print literature, interacting with this experimental tradition in digital literature. So I think it does kind of fulfill that function of expanding the reach of both sorts of scholarly communities and creative communities. I think that is a real accomplishment.

**JT:** Let me just pick up with Olsen and Tomasula. It was Steve Tomasula who did an interview with Anne Burdick and published it in an art magazine, not a literary magazine. I met Steve because he was in Chicago, and I arrived in Chicago when he had graduated. So he was very much a presence and introduced me to Anne. So I had Steve as a very welcome, almost co-editor, and Anne as a designer who crafted the first issues of EBR. And that really kept going and kept changing. There were always new talents at every conference I would attend, in different dissertations that I would read, or in the work that Fiction Collective 2 was doing, that Lance Olsen was very much a part of.

**SR:** Actually, when I was a master's student, I was a graduate assistant for FC2. So there's an interesting little bit of overlap when I was at Illinois State—

**JT :** These kinds of interactions are what define the community. It's not like everybody piling on, as happens in just the kind of default for social media.

**SR:** In addition to the social media contrast here is the sort of traditional academic journal which usually has some kind of institutional support. Another sort of remarkable thing about EBR, if we look back now longer than 25 years of publication, is that it's been run on a shoestring the whole time, sort of mainly been you, and you sort of pull people into it. And yet how many articles have been published over the years? Would you say more than 800?

**JT:** I've never counted them.

**SR:** Yeah, but very many certainly, and it was enough to fill two volumes in the *Post-Digital* book that you put out a couple of—or two books—that you put out a couple of years ago, and that was just sort of highlights of debates from the *Electronic Book Review*.

**JT:** If you look at the cover of those two volumes of collections from EBR, I collected one set, or maybe two. But then other collaborators over the two decades that I worked with edited their own individual sections. So you have a whole section edited by Anne, for example, Anne Burdick, and another one by—

**SR:** Eric Rasmussen.

**JT:** Eric, for sure. And the people that I interacted with over the years, that was a continuing interaction. And I think that is necessary, more necessary, that kind of continuity than, say, having a literary canon. It's having an extended and continuing community. That's what we can do.

**SR:** Let's turn now to electronic literature and the electronic literature field. You and I debated for a long time whether electronic literature was a field or what would potentially make it a field. But if we think about it as it is a field now, there's a big difference between writing a biography of William Gaddis and going to meetings and talking about research infrastructure and sort of planning out the structure of an emerging field. So what was it about electronic literature? You mentioned this sort of seeing the authors create. But what else has it been about electronic literature as a field that's made you continue to be interested in engaging with it?

**JT:** It's not that there's a set of great works that are emerging and that are going to be the things that everybody teaches every year in a course. That's the Harold Bloom canon model, and that's not going to fly, I don't think. But it's the collaborative communities, as I said before, that emerge. They do depend on having jobs in academia that are not precarious, because you can't form a meaningful community unless you have stability in your academic and professional life.

**SR:** But what is it about electronic literature that you think is important? Or why should people listening to this, be interested in electronic literature rather than just going off and reading Shakespeare?

**JT:** Because it's easier for those whose training is, for example, in the visual or material arts to create literary projects. It's as comfortable for them to do that as it is for somebody who studied creative writing.

**SR:** So it's that sort of hybridity that's—

**JT:** —that's really what makes it, is interactions. And I did write down a few comments.

**SR:** Ok, I'll let you do like a line or something—

**JT:** —comments by Anne Burdick, which continued to resonate with me and continued to do even after Anne stopped updating and redesigning the journal every two or three years, as she did for the first wave of EBR. My collection was the two volumes in *Post-Digital* from Bloomsbury. Anne's collection was *Digital\_Humanities*, and that was co written with Johanna Drucker, Peter Lunenfeld, Todd Presner, and Jeffrey Schnapp. As Anne says in her site, appropriately designated in the plural (the offices of anne burdick): "I am co-author and designer of *Digital\_Humanities* (MIT, 2013), a compact, game-changing report on the state of

contemporary knowledge production." And that's how I think we need to look at it, as not about producing literature so much. It's not about extending humanism. It's about knowledge production and questioning knowledge that is artificial and false and criticizing that. So she structured her entry into the humanities, which was a critical engagement with the humanities, and in a way, a post humanities, in a way that's very similar to what I described about the Post Digital volumes I put together, where there were multiple editors who each collected their own favorite grouping.

**SR:** Yeah, that sort of co-authorship, I think, is becoming more common and more distinctive about the field of digital culture. I think of what we're planning on doing with the Center. We won't completely abandon the idea of single authorship, but I think it's becoming much more commonplace to think in terms of the collective of the lab, of the possibility of writing books together. Let me turn a little bit now to the work that you've kind of done with research infrastructure. It's one of the things we'll be dealing with in electronic literature at the Center. Why is that important? Why should literary scholars be concerning themselves with databases?

**JT:** Databases mostly disappear, and literary arts, if they're going to be read and influential through the generations, need to be held onto, need to be accessible. We've got pretty good accessibility for the print canon, but accessibility will work differently for the born digital.

**SR:** Yeah, I mean, I think of electronic literature itself. One of the reasons why I think we have things like databases and archival collections is that— I was teaching electronic literature, and I kept noticing that as I'd redo my syllabus for the following year, about half the works that were on the syllabus last year were no longer accessible on the Internet. So I think there's something about documentation, about memory, that's important, and also just the fact that libraries didn't know, and to a certain degree still don't know how to handle these works.

**JT:** That's one reason why I do hope that in the Center we can rejuvenate the Consortium on Electronic Literature ([cellproject.net](http://cellproject.net)), which is a collection of databases. For the consortium to be sustainable, the different databases need to be in conversation with one another.

**SR:** Well, let's back up on that, because it was so important to sort of building this field. It's not that there was one database, certainly the one that we host at the University of Bergen, the ELMCIP Electronic Literature Knowledge Base has been an important one. There was the Electronic Literature Directory started at the ELO. There's a French language database, NT2. There's new databases beginning with Arabic electronic literature, African electronic literature. So this has sort of been one of the distinctive aspects of the field as it's grown internationally. And the consortium is essentially organizations that are doing database and doing different kinds of documentation of literature. So why is it important that they're in conversation with each other and sort of have this central CELL consortium?

**JT:** For the same reason that it's important that articles written about new works reference established scholarship, because you can tell what's the same and what's different. And also, if you're having this conversation actively, then you have more readers. You are able to offer courses that differ every year but talk about the same themes and the same concerns. And when you have that, then you've got eyes on the databases and you know when you need to ask the IT folks to intervene.

**SR:** Yeah. And I guess maybe standards that are evolving, and looking at how different databases do that, and learning from each other. Also, I think one of the things that these databases have done is sort of show people how do you actually begin to build a community, begin to build a field, and maybe counterintuitively in a way, starting up a database is a good way to gather a community around that set of knowledge.

**JT:** Yeah.

**SR:** So we're going to have a lot of balls in the air at the Center. We're going to take on some of that actual institutional support for the *Electronic Book Review* that in spite of the fact that it sort of made EBR a kind of outsider, I don't want to say rogue, but sort of an independent venture in comparison other academic journals, but hopefully that'll relieve some of the stress of every year, kind of coming up with resources to host the journal. We'll be doing that. We will also be doing the ELMCIP Electronic Literature Knowledge Base, or what we're beginning to think of as the Digital Narrative Database, DND, which will bring in all these different sorts of digital narrative—things like social media narratives, computer game narratives, these new story generation systems, AR, VR—looking at a bunch of different narrative concerns in addition to electronic literature per se. And then the Glossary project, can you say a little bit about that, the Glossary, and why it would be necessary?

**JT:** Well, there's a database, Rosi Braidotti's *Posthuman Glossary*, which she did with Maria Hlavajova, a colleague, that was all made together online. It's published as a book now, and then it's published as another book called *More Posthuman Glossary*. The thing about that project is the authors just kept coming. I don't know the number, I haven't counted them. It is a field.

**SR:** I guess as people became more and more posthuman, everyone wanted to talk about why we became more posthuman as they were becoming posthuman.

**JT:** And at the same time, we've got an absolutely necessary *Critical Posthumanism* database alongside that, one that developed at the same time: *Genealogy of the Posthuman*, online ([criticalposthumanism.net](http://criticalposthumanism.net)), and the book co-edited by Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter, *Critical Posthumanisms*. And my feeling is that the two are more likely to last, even though they're quite different by being separate and by being two separate databases and having one group reading the other.

**SR:** And the glossary, then, is this sort of an open access glossary of critical concepts, right?



**JT:** Yeah. And that's something I want to integrate more carefully into the consortium structure at the Center. Pretty much what the *Critical Posthumanism* site did is give a place for sustained reflection, both short descriptions of works and encyclopedic entries. That's something that is done one way in a critical database, a database that has criticism and critique marked as its point. And then there's just— bring in all of the products, just make sure that every topic is covered that the Braidotti database brings. So again, having those two in contention, in balance, is useful.

**SR:** Maybe one—we gotta wrap up pretty soon. But maybe one question I'd like to throw out to you or one of a couple last questions is: Why is literature important to electronic literature? This is something I've heard debated before. I'm interested in where you fall on that spectrum of how important it is to look at these things from a literary context?

**JT:** An alternative that has stuck in my head is one that John Cayley at one of the ELO conferences tossed out, and that is that maybe we should talk about it as literary arts. And what I like about it is the way that phrase brings the art community into contact with the literary community, and that distinguishes it a bit from the print literature field.

**SR:** Well, another question, following up on that, is that we're looking at digital narrative. In addition to things like hypertext novels, we'll be looking at things like how did Donald Trump become elected president through conspiracy theories like QAnon. And one of the things I'm hoping, and I'm wondering what you think about this, is that our studies of electronic literature can somehow inform our understanding of other kinds of digital narratives.

**JT:** Our understanding of narratives. Yeah. We have to know what follows what, and we have to know what kinds of futures we can anticipate with a given set of material? And again, I'll now quote that line from Anne Burdick that she used to describe her digital humanities book. She calls herself "a co-author and designer of a compact, game-changing report on the state of contemporary knowledge production." And that's how I think we need to look at it, is that it's not about producing literature so much. It's not about extending humanism. It's about knowledge production and questioning knowledge that is artificial and false and criticizing that. That's I think the necessity and all of the other elements that I've come up with and we've come up with about forming communities, keeping databases in place and such like, that's the point, to have a knowledge that can be carried forward and that can be narrativized. That's one way that knowledge is conveyed is through narratives, narratives that reference actual happenings that are going on around us.

**SR:** Now, maybe as we are becoming digital or becoming posthuman, I think that's one of the things that most interests me about electronic literature is how it's sort of reflecting these changes in how we think and communicate and are subjects of platform culture, as Søren Pold and Christian Ulrik Andersen would refer to it.

Well, we got to wrap up shortly but one last big question that I have for you. You're someone who's been a teacher for 30-some years, no? And the Center, I think, is an opportunity for ten years to make a big contribution to digital narrative. But what do you think the legacy of your work, of EBR, and of your upcoming work in the Center should be? What do you hope that the next generation takes away from it?

**JT:** The works that are being made now, if a selection of them are being talked about ten years from now, then that's a sign that the Center has done what it's meant to do. If the conversations will keep going after I'm no longer participating in those conversations, directly after I've retired, and after others have come into the Center. And that means that academia needs to have the same kinds of continuing additions that we've managed to do just with the affordances of the digital environment for literary studies. So it's really keeping the conversation going and changing it and articulating differences and similarities as we go.

**SR:** And who knows? Maybe it'll save literature. Looking at enrollment numbers of literary subjects, uh, lately—

**JT:** An alternative is needed to the humanist structure that we still have in place but are not supporting financially.

**SR:** Well, thanks so much, Joe. I've been talking with Joseph Tabbi about the *Electronic Book Review* and about the field of electronic literature and about the work that he is going to be doing with the Center for Digital Narrative. And that is our episode today of Off Center. We'll look forward to joining you next time as we learn more about different forms of digital narrative.

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