

NODE AND NETWORK IN LOS ANGELES

The Electronic Literature Organization's State of the Arts Symposium, 2002

The high-tech trappings of electronic literature – laptops, e-book readers, CD-ROMS – belie the fact that the field is framed in traditional forms of discourse, such as critical prose that can be read in a book or expounded upon from a lectern. It's a necessary irony, then, that the practitioners, theorists and publishers in the emergent field of e-literature periodically need to meet face-to-face in order to better ascertain where they are and where they are headed.

The Electronic Literature Organization (or ELO) – a nonprofit organization founded in 2000 by Scott Rettberg and Robert Coover to promote literature designed for electronic media – held just such an event, its State of the Arts Symposium, at UCLA. For three days, an international group of over one hundred and fifty e-literates met to discuss the issues surrounding the production and reception of electronic literature, or e-literature for short.

For many years, e-literature had chiefly been represented by hypertext, the more refined spawn of computer culture and choose-your-own-adventure novels. The chief differentiating structure separating a hypertext from a text is the link, a point of passage that allows the reader alternate paths through a text. As e-literature theorist Jay Bolter writes, “hypertext presents itself to a reader as a series of possible texts, only one of which is realized with each

act of reading.¹” Being an open-ended, de-centered, non-sequential system of signification, hypertext empowers the reader to produce meaning, while suppressing the notion that there is one finished Meaning that the author intends. It’s no surprise, then, that critics would gravitate towards the medium, since hypertext embodies the principles of indeterminacy and interactivity posited by such thinkers as Jacques Derrida, who often uses such terms as link (*liasons*), web (*toile*), and network (*réseau*) in his writing, and Roland Barthes, who famously asserts, “the goal of literary work is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text².”

In the last decade, however, e-literature has come to mean much more than just hypertext. With the vast potentiality of creation on the web, texts (hyper- or otherwise) have come to include still images, audio, video and animation. Certain works, such as the science fiction hypertext Dark Lethe <<http://www.darklethe.net>> are predicated on the idea of collaboration and readers are encouraged to add to the text as they explore it. Other works, such as the poems curated on the site Poems that Go <<http://www.poemsthatgo.com>>, are kinetic texts in which words appear, disappear, move and morph onscreen.

Some e-literature maintains the form of its print counterpart but adds an audio or visual element, such as the poems in The Cortland Review <<http://www.cortlandreview.com/>> which include audio recordings of poets reading their work. Still others, like the poem by Jonathan Minton archived in the current issue of Drunken Boat

¹ Bolter, Jay David. “Degrees of Freedom.” <<http://www.lcc.gatech.edu/~bolter/degrees.html>>, 1996.

² Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970. *S/Z*. Translated by Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974.

<<http://www.drunkenboat.com/db4/minton/minton.html>>, use an algorithmic process to randomly generate text, so that each reading for each reader is a different experience.

The proliferation of possible modes of expression has grown at such an incredible rate that it's hard to keep track of what exactly e-literature refers to, though that's not for lack of effort. Nick Montfort, one of the participants in the ELO symposium, wrote a controversial essay last year and titled it after the Buggles' song, "Cybertext Killed the Hypertext Star." That piece and the subsequent impassioned ripostes published in the Electronic Book Review <<http://www.altx.com/ebr/ebr11/11mon/index.html>> show how much is at stake in these new permutations of literature. If infighting and heated academic debate are an indication of the vitality of an artistic movement, e-literature has undoubtedly arrived.

Buoyed by such volatile issues and the enthusiasm of its participants, the ELO conference began on April 4th with a cabaret of electronic literature, which was held along with the rest of the conference in the Kinross Building on UCLA's campus. Works such as Robert Kendell's three-dimensional search for an interpretive path, "Clues," and Talan Memmott's interactive, cybertextual exploration of simulation and the human face, "Translucidity," were projected on a screen and navigated through by its respective creator.

Shelly Jackson read a passage anthropomorphizing the body's connective tissues from her sinuous print novel, "The Melancholy of Anatomy," raising a question of how dependant hypertext is on its medium. Critics such as George P. Landow have maintained that certain print works like James

Joyce's *Ulysses* or Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, are actually hypertexts because of their extreme openness and allusiveness. If that's the case, Jackson's exquisite evocation of the body's internal organs should take its place alongside those works. During the cabaret, an interesting issue was raised by the performance of electronic works as *performance* — even when new technologies were under examination, the form reverted back to the “writer reads” paradigm, and in nearly every case, hearing someone read their work was less engrossing than actually getting to navigate it on a computer.

The next day began with a speech by one of the symposium's keynote speakers. N. Katherine Hayles, a professor of English at UCLA and one of the leading thinkers on the synthesis of humans and machine (what she terms the post-human condition), addressed the audience by taking account of where we stood as electronic folk. Hayles, having been at the forefront of e-literature for some time, lamented the passing of agrarian and communal principles from online communities. Co-opted for economic ends, especially in the U.S., the kind of utopian fervor that possessed the first e-writers has largely subsided and been replaced by the kind of entrenchment that characterizes print communities.

Hayles also mentioned the development and evolution of cognitive environments in which humans and computers interact, often unobtrusively, and she attempted to stake out the place of e-literature in that terrain. One of her key concepts, which became something of a catch phrase for the symposium, was *obsolescence*. Hayles articulated the fear of many cyber-artists that in time their work will slough away due to rapidly changing

technological environments. The situation could be seen as parallel to a musician whose music – everything from the guitar she plays to the material she records on – is squarely based on eight-track technology. What will happen to her work when tapes and CDs catch on? For electronic writers, it's not a simple question of translation; a hypertext written on a certain program and in a certain language cannot just be squished to fit into updated technology. When its medium changes, its content changes. Does the threat of impending obsolescence render electronic work, especially in this incipient moment, futile?

Hayles raised this question but did not provide an answer, though others, such as Mark Bernstein, chief engineer for the hypertext publisher Eastgate, seemed to feel that the notion was exaggerated. Good work, according to Bernstein, the kind that leads readers and scholars to care passionately about it, will always survive.

The panels that followed explored a variety of topics, from the existence of graduate programs in electronic media to a discussion of the issues current e-writers were facing. Rob Wittig, Director and Lead Writer for Tank20 Literary Studio, discussed how the standards by which we judge literature should not be loosened when we consider electronic work. Wittig demands the same emotional and intellectual effect from a hypertext, for example, as he does from a novel, and he wondered how more people might be made to feel “welcome” into the often-foreboding world of e-literature.

Stuart Moulthrop, well known for his wide-ranging experiments in digital narrative, was an especially refreshing panelist. He provided the audience

with various “thought-experiments,” for example asking how attached we are to the term “literature,” and why we would feel embarrassed if it was replaced by the term “game.” Another panelist, Diane Slattery, Associate Director of the Academy of Electronic Media, discussed her Glide project, in which she constructs a purely visual language. According to Slattery, our perceptual apparatus has changed immeasurably in the last few centuries. Seeing vehicles such as the locomotive for the first time, viewing entertainment such as the cinema, and ingesting hallucinogenic drugs such as LSD, humans have gradually begun to experience language as secondary to image. Slattery’s solution to the displacement of word by image is to create a symbolic system where words *are* images. She has created a language of glyphs that are given the qualities of color, motion, and transformation.

In the afternoon, the second keynote speaker, Robert Coover, the influential writer, took the stage to discuss various electronic works he found intriguing. He also commented on the moment surrounding his influential essay “The End of Books,” published in *The New York Review of Books* in 1992. At that point, one of few such moments in history, Coover was able to discuss a genre in its entirety and, he claimed, review every existing work in e-literature. He finished up his presentation by screening a short film of the work he is doing with his students now. Much of this creative expression comes from the time spent in the virtual reality environment at Brown University, known as the CAVE™. This immersive environment, which heretofore had been the exclusive provenance of scientists, includes a high-resolution virtual display theater and stereo-video and audio projection equipment. Users, wearing stereographic glasses, can move and interact with

objects in the virtual environment the way they might if they were dreaming. While they move, a supercomputer updates their surroundings and their perspectives. As is often the case when one kind of technology is discussed via the means of another, less powerful kind, the short film could not do justice to the wildly surrealistic environment that Coover discussed.

After a brief recess for dinner, the crowd adjourned to the airy galleries of the Hammer Museum where more electronic works were shown. These included John Cayley's "riverIsland," a dynamic, multi-voice exploration of the iconographic nature of language in which transliteral morphing took a Chinese poem through various algorithmic forms, Stephanie Strickland's "The Errand on Which we Came," a graceful, imagistic hyper-poem that begins "Gentle reader, begin anywhere. Skip anything. This is framed fully for the purposes of skipping. Of course, it can be read straight through, but this is not a better reading, not a better life" and Caitlin Fisher's "These Waves of Girls," winner of the ELO's 2001 Electronic Literature Award. Fisher's performance was perhaps the most powerful of the symposium, chiefly because she has such dramatic timing and because her prose so accurately captures the fraught, fearful, feared world of nascent sexuality. After the presentations, the e-literates lingered over chardonnay and sushi, rhapsodizing the lovely embodiment art gave to the principles and theories of cyber culture.

The final day was led off by a keynote speech by Jason Epstein, longtime editorial director at Random House and founder of *The New York Review of Books*. Epstein was something of an odd choice to speak at the ELO symposium, coming as he did from the world of print media -- and sure

enough, his comments centered on the evolution of print publishing. Epstein asserted that the inventions of digital technology was akin to that of moveable type, and that just as the latter humbled popes and tyrants, the former would eventually transform the outdated mechanisms of print publishing. The elements that will propel this revolution, including the ability to store and to transmit text electronically, are already in place, though Epstein cautioned that publishers would fight what might prove to be their *own* obsolescence with tooth and nail.

Epstein descried current practices in publishing as outdated and wasteful, vividly evoking the pity and terror the sight of a warehouse full of unsold books awaiting destruction can cause. In the future, according to Epstein, no book will exist until someone orders it. There will be no overprinting. No wholesale markup. No unnecessary shipping costs. And as a result, the consumer will pay less for a book while both author and publisher will make more. The model Epstein described was a variation on existent Print-On-Demand (POD) technologies, where with the touch of a key, anyone can order a title from a vast virtual library. As for e-books, Epstein seemed certain that they would not catch on, except in the case of encyclopedias, almanacs, atlases, guide books or other sources of reference material where information is apt to change with some regularity. He felt that, like the OED online, such references would be available via subscription services, whereas most pleasure reading would take place with the old-fashioned book.

The symposium finished off with panels on multimedia criticism, publishing and archiving work online, and the development of new web tools, such as Eastgate Systems' content management assistant, Tinderbox, Night

Kitchen's interactive authoring tool, TK3, and Bill Seaman's exploration of machine genetics, the Hybrid Invention Generator.

The tension between media as a computational tool and as a delivery destination was brought up by the panel on multimedia criticism and Jane Yellowlees Douglas, a specialist in hypertext/media and interactive fiction, discussed the integration of navigational systems as a signifying component of the text and not just as a means to access content. In addition, editors from various online literary ventures, including <<http://www.drunkenboat.com>>, <<http://www.cauldronandnet.com>>, and <<http://www.poemsthatgo.com>>, discussed their aesthetic sensibilities and editorial process. William Warner, Director of The Digital Cultures Project, raised some interesting issues about how editors online act more as a frame than as a traditional publisher, especially when works of art already exist somewhere on the web. Finally, there was the requisite conversation about funding, or rather about the lack thereof, and ultimately none of the ideas that were discussed provided a viable means through which those interested in cultivating the digital arts could manage to sustain themselves.

After the final day of panels and a bon voyage banquet, the symposium ended where it had began, with more presentations of electronic work, plus an open-mike celebration of e-literature.

If I were to attempt to gauge the mood of those who had participated in the three days of panels, I would warrant it mixed. Where there was pride at being a visionary and one of the first minds to grapple with and to harness the force with which digital technology is inevitably transforming our lives,

there was also annoyance at having come too early, of having arrived upon the multifarious and fertile lands of e-literature long before the instruments of canonicity. Where there was delight in creating and discovering new modes of expression, there was disappointment that the very newness of the forms meant that funding, an audience, and academic validation were still far off. Where there was gratification at having stepped away from the screen's bare glare to commingle and to communicate with other like-minded individuals, there were telltale hints of anxiousness, cliquishness, and territoriality raising their spiky heads.

Nonetheless, in celebrating new works of e-literature and blueprinting a handful of possible paths to the future, the symposium was a success. The only irrefutable certainty to be gleaned from this meeting of the minds is that digital technologies are here to stay. In the coming days, many spheres, including but certainly not limited to literature, will be touched, if not permeated, by the effects of new tools, some of which have already been invented and await marketing. Perhaps, as has been hypothesized, ever-greater facility with and assimilation *into* these tools will arrive in conjunction with a radical reconfiguration of what it means to be human. Perhaps not. Just as in hypertext, this hypothesis could prove both to be and not to be true. Every idea, every prediction, every question, unlike in the linear trajectory of two millennia of printed discourse, is subject to revision, to forming, to dispersing, to reforming in an altered state, to being, as Jay Bolter writes, “called back into time and modified if not contradicted³.”

³ Bolter, Jay David. “Degrees of Freedom.” <<http://www.lcc.gatech.edu/~bolter/degrees.html>>, 1996.

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