ELECTRONIC LITERATURE

The arrival of the computer age has affected creative writers profoundly, and no doubt will continue to do so in ways most of us can't yet imagine. Indeed, if any entry in this book has the potential to become obsolete overnight, it is this one. "Early" writing about Internet culture, which often focused on MUDs and MOOs, a few years later seems as quaint and outdated as discussions of the telegraph or the Pony Express. And "electronic literature" might well include everything from imaginative writing that was never intended to appear on a computer screen but has somehow found its way there to work that cannot be viewed in any other format. As such, most creative writing produced in the future will ultimately fall into this category. However, our focus in the short space we have here will be on a few of the ways that e-creative writing differs from its print equivalent. Even our notion of who we are as writers has shifted. As Sherry Turkle says, "We come to see ourselves differently as we catch sight of our images in the mirror of the machine" (1995, 9).

Before looking at any specific manifestation of electronic literature, we should first consider how significantly the computer has affected the creation and distribution of writing itself. We now take for granted the ease and speed of word processing, but, particularly for those working in book-length forms, the ability to cut, paste, and edit huge blocks of text has radically altered the composition process. Writers no longer hesitate to make small changes deep in a manuscript that might result in re-pagination, and editorial suggestions that once might have taken hours to implement can now be accommodated with the click of a few keystrokes.

In the computer age, writers begin their hunt for information—the name of a city street, the year an event took place, facts about a disease that will make a character seem more believable—via search engines. Research that previously might have taken days at the library can now be accomplished in a few seconds with a Google query. Many contemporary

novelists have remarked on how much more realistic their writing now is, with fact-checking so much easier than it once was. And there is no excuse any longer for a misremembered quotation or an inaccurate date when it is so easy—for both writer *and* reader—to search for the correct version.

Once a piece of writing is finished, the writer's quest for publication now usually begins online, with electronic information about publishers likely to be far more current than anything in print. A typical literary journal listing in *Writers' Market* or *The International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses* can take up to eighteen months from the time it is filed with the press to the day it actually appears on paper—plenty of time for an editor's preferences to change or a magazine to go out of business. By contrast, journal editors with online listings can update their publishing needs and contact information immediately. The classifieds page in *Poets and Writers Magazine* (www.pw.org/mag/classifieds.htm), the searchable members directory at the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses (www.clmp.org/directory/), and the links page of LitLine (www.litline.org/links/index.html) all contain full, and free, listings of literary publishers. (See also "Contests," "Submissions," and "Writers' Resources.")

One the earliest types of literature specifically designed for computers is hypertext, which provides authors with ways to challenge the traditional notion of storytelling. In a typical hypertext, the reader is presented with a short narrative passage called a "lexia," which is often no larger than a computer screen; several key words or phrases in the lexia are highlighted as hyperlinks. Depending upon which link the reader clicks, the narrative may move in any number of directions. The multilinear story may take sudden turns or repeat previous lexia, which, now that the reader has new information, will be seen in a different light; however, it is unlikely that someone will view every lexia on any given read-through. Normally there are one or more "end" lexia, which signal that the story has finished.

Roland Barthes's ruminations on the nature of text in "The Death of the Author" are frequently cited by critics as suggestive of the hypertext experience: "a multidimensional space in which are married and contested several writings . . . a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture" (1968, 149). Less sophisticated readers tend to compare the form to the "Create Your Own Adventure" series of children's books. In either case, hypertext has clear pleasures and obvious faults. The interactive nature of the genre means readers play a far more

significant role in the construction of the story than they would in traditional fiction. Because of its open-endedness, its ceding of a large measure of authorial control, its resistance to making conventional narrative sense, the hypertext has been touted as the postmodern fiction par excellence. Indeed, the indeterminate nature of the text ensures that no "correct" reading is ever possible, and a well-written hypertext novel like Michael Joyce's *Afternoon* presents readers with an astonishing range of pleasures.

Unfortunately, hypertext writers are limited to a certain pattern of storytelling. Because of the randomness built into the form, hypertext novels move in fits and starts. Authors who prize the ability to closely influence their readers' reactions are especially frustrated by the medium. Digression is the norm. It is easy for a reader to give up on a long piece of hypertext, since the end is rarely in sight (even it is really only one click away). Moreover, as hypertext can exist only on-screen, the pleasures of sustained reading are limited: even the most sophisticated "electronic books" have yet to rival the simple felicities of their paper counterparts. While trade editors and publishers (q.v.) have worked diligently to acquire copyrights (q.v.) for electronic distribution of previously published work, they, too, have found e-books to be unwieldy. "Even Ann Godoff, president and publisher of Random House Trade Group and creator of the digital imprint, admitted that she had not yet managed to enjoy reading a book off a screen, or read a whole electronic book. Neither has almost anyone else in the industry" (Kirkpatrick, 2000). Granted, literary software publishers such as Eastgate Systems—which also publishes the most popular program, Storyspace—have sought to commodify longer hypertext works; yet electronic novels have proven to be no more lucrative than any other form of avant-garde literature. In the words of Eastgate's Web site: "Important writing is not necessarily popular."

If hypertext has been difficult to market, easier (and free) access to shorter works of electronic literature is offered through Web-based literary magazines, often called e-zines. Early e-zines were usually nothing more than offshoots of their creator's vanity home pages. On these pages, writers of dubious ability and no reputation would chiefly post their own work and occasionally the work of other writers. Then, during the high-tech boom of the mid- and late-nineties, many academically trained creative writers found themselves working computer jobs. As they gained experience in Web design, suddenly the *look* of some e-zines was far superior to anything their print equivalents could offer. In addition to a sleek appearance, e-zines offered other advantages. Though literary magazines

remain as unprofitable as ever, the cost of an e-zine is modest enough to make nearly anyone with time, energy, and a small amount of Web savvy a potential literary editor. Compared to the thousands of dollars it takes to produce a thousand copies of a glossy 100-page paper journal, e-zines cost only as much as the annual fee for a server, or, on a server sponsored by an academic institution, nothing at all. Access is unlimited, and the number of "pages" possible per issue is far greater, potentially almost limitless. An editor could conceivably print an epic poem or a full-length novel in every issue—and still have plenty of room left for other material.

Ironically, though, the very technology that makes this vast space available for storing literature also creates a prejudice against extended reading. Web surfers are acclimated to quick viewing. They don't stay long with a single page; therefore, editors have discovered that the shorter the work, the more likely it will be read. The more successful e-zines have a variety of short offerings and take full advantage of the electronic medium. Short Quicktime films or Shockwave graphics may accompany works of literature. Writers can be heard and seen reading their work aloud through audio/video devices like RealPlayer. E-zines are also a natural medium for hypertext, although this resource is surprisingly underutilized in most magazines.

Among the advantages of online publication is the close relationship it fosters between writers and readers. The author's e-mail address is generally available at the end of her piece, so readers can immediately weigh in with their opinions. Literary discussions that in the past would have been conducted in cafés, bars, or through the post can now take place online. On a more mundane level, e-mail manuscript submissions to e-zines have made electronic submission of material to some print journals more acceptable, too, providing creative writers with a faster and more convenient way of submitting material than through the postal service.

Publication in the best e-zines still does not carry the same prestige as publication in the best print journals. However, there are signs that this is changing. E-zines like the *Blue Moon Review* have been included in *Writer's Digest*'s "50 Best Poetry Markets." E-zines such as *BeeHive* regularly feature fine writing *and* spectacular visual effects. One of the first places writers and readers looking to explore e-zines should begin is webdelsol. com. A long-standing locus for all things literary and electronic, Web Del Sol (WDS) includes everything from links to the Web sites of print and electronic journals to newsletters and columns about e-publishing to its own e-zine and online chapbooks by WDS authors. The evolution of the

site mirrors the evolution of e-zines in general. Web Del Sol began with a few links to magazines, a lovably cantankerous editorial perspective, and an annoying MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) theme jingle. These days, WDS has a slick design, links to *USA Today,* and advertisements for workshops, magazines, and movies—proving yet again that e-commerce follows on the heels of *any* online endeavor.

Though traditional literary magazines were initially hesitant to move to the Internet, most print journals of any standing now also have a Web site. Typically, this site consists of the table of contents for current and past issues, submission information, selected works from the magazine, and links to other literary journals. Of course, some journals have been more ambitious, and generous, with their e-offerings. For a time, the *Kenyon Review* made each new issue, in its entirety, available as a pdf download, and *Ploughshares* has put most of its back issues online at www.pshares.org.

Because Internet users are accustomed to getting their online literature for free, they have proven to be bad customers for electronic books. Granted, a few optimistic and persistent e-book publishers, such as Boson Books (www.cmonline.com/boson/), continue to sell books designed to be read on computers or handheld personal digital assistants. However, most electronic publishers of creative writing offer their product gratis and hope to cash in on advertising. The results can be mixed. A site like Bartleby.com, which unites economics with art, offers a peculiarly incongruous reading experience. Milton's "On the Death of a Fair Infant Dying of a Cough" is accompanied by a flashing promise that the reader can make $125–$175 per hour working from home. Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution* is festooned with ads for AT&T wireless service. Nevertheless, despite these commercial intrusions, free admission to many of the world's classics books ought to be a boon for aspiring lower-income writers, provided they can circumvent the obvious impediment of Internet access.

Of course, even when the reading experience isn't interrupted by pop-up ads, a notable difference exists between the process of following text on-screen and on the page. One of the most vocal critics of electronic literature has been Sven Birkerts. In "'The Fate of the Book,'" he argues for the advantages of the hierarchical and closed systems of that "artifact." Without books, Birkerts maintains, the style of individual authors will gradually become more and more alike. Moreover, the words they write will be in some ways less important: "When we read from a screen, or write directly onto a screen (without printing out), we in fact never cross the

border from atom to bit, or bit to atom. There is a slight, but somehow consequential, loss of gravity; the word is denied its landing place in the order of material things, and its impact on the reader is subtly lessened" (1996, 198).

Whether or not Birkerts's gloomy predictions come true, the poetics of digital code is still clearly evolving, and the consensus to date is that electronic literature has not yet lived up to its potential. (See "The Electronic Labyrinth" at www.iath.virginia.edu/elab/elab.html for a concise, readable analysis of the subject.) Granted, increasing numbers of young writers are turning to the Web for publication: they are exploring the impact of technology on the ancient acts of writing and reading. And Richard Lanham is more optimistic than Birkerts: "We will learn to use volatile electronic text to do the work of the world, just as we have learned to use fixed text" (2003, 232). Yet electronic literature is currently an unstable medium. Links go dead: a page that is accessible today may disappear tomorrow. And to date, no genius has yet emerged to fully exploit the possibilities of word and screen. Until there exists a serious literature that can only be accessed via computer, what Charles Bernstein slyly calls B-O-O-K technology will likely remain the industry standard.