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The Electronic Literati, in Search of a Voice

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Most novels and poems don't require instruction manuals to figure out how to read them. But for many works of electronic literature, some assembly is required.

The printed book is best suited for linear narratives — and all the reader needs to do is turn the page. But electronic literature is written to take advantage of digital media features, hyperlinking portions of text, soundtracks, video clips, and more.

Authors and scholars of this relatively new art form gathered in May at the University of Maryland at College Park for a symposium on "The Future of Electronic Literature." To get things started, they held a public reading of their works in an "open mic and mouse night."

For spectators entering the darkened auditorium, it was hard to tell whether the event was a literary reading or a movie. The electronic works were projected on a large screen at the front of the room while authors read them aloud from a lectern. Experiencing the works often involved watching the screen while listening to the words, since many incorporated visual elements.

The variety of the work highlighted how undefined electronic literature remains, decades after the first English majors began tinkering with computers.

Many of the authors had to begin by explaining how their pieces worked.

"This is actually an interactive work," said Deena Larsen, after reading aloud a short poem projected on the screen. "The words that are in sans serif, you can click on, so somebody, where would we like to go?"

A voice from the audience called out one of the highlighted words: "meaning."

Music blared from the computer's speakers as Ms. Larsen clicked, and new words floated across the computer display. She read each one theatrically as it appeared: "Meaning. Relationships. Relations. Revelations. Reveal. Intentions. Words change."

"Somewhere else?" she asked, prompting the next choice from the crowd.

Some authors let the computer decide how the words would be arranged.

That was the case in "Slipping Glimpse," a poem by Stephanie Strickland.

During one part of the piece, the computer program selected words from the poem at random and superimposed them on video footage of a ocean's surface. The size, movement, and tilt of the words were altered constantly to mimicripples. "Our goal has been to put the text at the disposition of the water," said Ms. Strickland. "The water reads the poem text."

Some of the electronic literature shown had no visible text at all.

Kenneth Sherwood's "Kodachrome Blue Syntax" consists of an old home movie of a father and child playing at the beach, while a recording of a voice talking about memory plays in an endless loop. The multimedia work did have a text prologue with a passage from Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media*: "Can the loop be a new narrative form appropriate for the computer age? ... The loop gave birth not only to cinema but also to computer programming."

Many of the works at the reading, and in a collection published this year by the Electronic Literature Organization, a nonprofit group, came across as abstract, with few memorable characters or stories. A frequent theme is electronic literature itself, or at least the problem of recording and expressing thoughts or feelings.

"Electronic literature interrogates what it means to write and think with digital media," said N. Katherine Hayles,

a professor of English at the University of California at Los Angeles, in an interview.

No best seller has emerged in this new medium. But several participants in the conference said popularity was not the right measure of success.

"I think it will always be an art form that operates outside the mainstream," said Scott Rettberg, an associate professor of humanistic informatics at the University of Bergen, in Norway, in an e-mail interview. "You'll never buy it at Borders or Wal-Mart — but that's fine with me."

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