Experiments in Irrational Exuberance: The Present and Future of Electronic Literature *or* How I Became E-Literate

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Preliminaries

I'd like to thank Jim Kalmbach, Ron Fortune, and the other organizers of the Computers and Writing Conference for inviting me back to central Illinois to give this talk. I completed my M.A. in English/Fiction Writing here in Normal, and it was here that I began my first tentative explorations of the Internet and of what was at the time the very new-fangled notion of the World Wide Web. I had my first experience of the Computers and Writing conference two years ago in Fort Worth, when one of my partners in crime, Nick Montfort, talked me into expanding a trip to Austin for the Hypertext conference to include a brief visit to the C/W conference, where he was presenting. I didn't register on that occasion, but Nick did manage to sneak us into the banquet, where we were greeted warmly, and heard an inspiring keynote address from an open-source visionary, Miguel de Icaza of the Gnome Project, that I fear I can't possibly compete with this afternoon. It is indeed my pleasure to be here at this gathering again, not only for the free meal, but also for the companionship of this group, which has been intimately interested in, and has been producing important work on, writing and technology for the past eighteen years. The Computers and Writing community has done something else that I admire a great deal: institutionalized computers and writing curricula within Rhetoric and Composition. We're only beginning to do the same in electronic literature.

During the course of this talk, I hope to do four things:

- To contextualize the nascent field of electronic literature within the history of our recent past.
- To tell you a bit about the story of my own seduction from the safer studies of contemporary literature and fiction writing to the more tumultuous and invigorating world of electronic literature.
- To tell you a bit about what The Electronic Literature Organization has been up to the last few years and our organizational intentions for the years to come.
- Lastly, given world enough and time, to show you some recent works of electronic literature that I find particularly intriguing, and to give you a sense of the variety of approaches that writers are taking to creating works of literature designed specifically for the electronic media.

I should probably first apologize for the title of this talk. It is pure marketing, designed primarily to draw you here, and makes a false promise. While I know a bit about the present of electronic literature, I am as ill equipped as anyone in this room to make prognostications about its future. Electronic literature has changed so drastically, consistently and continuously over the course of the last few years that one could play seer on the future course of this multivalent field only at one's own peril. But the future is a gleaming notion, the time and place where all our hopes reside. If I can't describe the future of electronic literature, at least I can cast some pebbles that direction.

I'm not going to speak much on the past of electronic literature. Certainly the field does have a past: hypertext as computer-

based literary technology can be traced back to Vannevar Bush's notion of the memex in 1945, through Ted Nelson's elaboration of hypertext and the docuverse in the 1970s, into the innovations of the Eastgate School in the 1980s and 90s, through to the recent explosion of activity on the World Wide Web. Multimedia can be traced back even further. You could start with Wagner as did Packer and Jordan in their recent anthology, or you could move back even further, to the Ancient Greek stage. As long as humanity has enjoyed art, perhaps, and has differentiated its forms, there have been artists trying to blur the boundaries between media, to bring back together that which has bifurcated, if only to bifurcate again along a different seam.

The Context of Electronic Literature: Where Do These Things Belong?

Electronic literature is not yet canonical. At this present point, there are so many different kinds of authors and artists working on this project in the process of becoming, arriving at the work of creating electronic literature from so many different disciplinary perspectives, that each of us observes our own antecedents, each of us has our own points of reference, each of us pays credence to our own myths of origin. So forgive me if I start with the recent past and linger in the present. My own myth of the origin of electronic literature is rooted in the innovative literary traditions of the 20th Century. Please realize that my narrative is just that, and not a totalizing meta-narrative to which all or even many in the field of electronic literature adhere. Electronic literature is not taking place in any one distinct part of the culture, but is springing from the side of many different disciplines.

While I often argue that literary studies may be the best place in which to locate electronic literature, because it offers a sophisticated set of critical practices that place works within the cultural context in which they are produced, at this point you're more likely to find an e-lit practitioner in a design, art, communications or film program than you are in a literature or creative writing program. For all its cutting-edge theory,

and the generally left-leaning politics of its constituency, most contemporary English and Literature departments are fundamentally *conservative*, more likely to recognize and acknowledge innovations that occurred fifty, one hundred, three hundred or five hundred years ago than those taking place today. Creative writing, which is now isolated from Literature proper in most universities, for reasons I don't completely understand, is surprisingly even less welcoming to literature developed for any medium other than print. While the workshop method that has been institutionalized in creative writing programs over the last forty years has much to offer those of us interested in developing production environments for the creation of new works of electronic literature, most creative writing faculty treat the notion of work written and developed for the computer, rather than the printed page, as a kind of affront or attack on print culture, and want nothing to do with it. I anticipate that this hostility will dissipate over time, as more complex and innovative narrative-driven works of electronic literature take their place in the popular consciousness, and as it becomes clearer to the detractors of e-lit that this work represents not an attack on, but rather a continuation of existing literary traditions. Nonetheless, Katherine Hayles' remark at this conference — that in the near future, literature departments will need to decide whether they truly are literature departments or exclusively *print literature* departments — holds true for creative writing programs as well.

After the Bubble

It is our privilege to live in interesting times. I think the period that we've just survived: the turn of the Millennium, a period perhaps roughly bounded by beginnings of the economic Internet boom with the Netscape Initial Price Offering in August 1995 and the national tragedy of September 11, 2001, will be remembered as one of the most bizarre and transformative in our history. The issues brought to the foreground during this time, ranging from terrorism to cloning, from the ability of monopolistic multinational corporations to manipulate and distort the world economy to the effects of a set of ubiquitous new technologies on the way that we

communicate, create, and even how we structure our own thoughts, will remain those that we wrestle with well into the future.

Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan's catchphrase for the prevailing sentiments that drove the stock market during this period, "Irrational Exuberance," has been burned into collective memory by the swift rise, fall, collapse, and wake of the "Internet economy." By now the story of this tragicomic catastrophe is so well known as to be cliché. A set of relatively simple but profound improvements in our technological and communications infrastructure resulted in a series of widely-adopted cultural practices including "surfing the net," "checking email," and "selling it on eBay." This cultural transformation occurred with great rapidity, was accompanied by a dizzying storm of hype, and with that excitement, a seemingly endless flow of venture capital. For a moment, Wall Street bought firmly into the notion that attention was a more valuable commodity than cash. For a few years, the economy was measured not by profits, but by "traffic" and "eyeballs." Speculation was regarded not as a sign of uncertainty, but of a confident business model. Companies that had never turned a profit were able to raise enough capital to buy out major brick-and-mortar concerns. At some point it became obvious to everyone that the future of this boom was untenable; we were living on a bubble and at some point it would pop. But when everything is going up, and Mom and Pop are emptying their savings accounts to invest in the latest B2B portal play, the impulse to let it ride can be very powerful indeed. Much of the Western world did just that, investing in bullshit and dreams until the market for tulips finally dried up and the bottom fell out, taking much of rest of the economy with it.

While the hangover from this party has left some with a wrecked house and dim prospects, I think that many, even those affected negatively by the crash, are thankful that it's all over now. The real has supplanted the surreal, and the wealth that many felt they never truly deserved has returned to the swamp from which it came. A lesson has been learned, one I think valuable for all of us as we proceed with our experiments. Don't trust your dream to venture capitalists; they'll only screw it up.

Thankfully, while the marketing executives and venture capitalists were having their decadent launch parties in the penthouse suites, the writers and artists were at work in garrets of their own. The economics of electronic literature are such that no rational person would or could work on projects of innovative experimental literature, and then distribute them for free on the global network, with a profit motive in mind. Very few people creating web-based hypertext, kinetic poetry, interactive drama, or any of a myriad of other forms of electronic literature are doing so with money on the brain. In fact, the reason that most of the people doing this are doing it is because it's *fun*.

Formally trained creative writers in particular have been taught that they should work with a limited set of tools—the tools of language—and with a particular media in mind—the fixed, printed page, in all its monumental permanence. With the profusion of personal computers, with the inclusion of screens and multimedia in everyday textuality, and most importantly with the global network linking all of those screens together, we writers find tools that were once cordoned off to other disciplines are now available to us. Concrete poets can now shape poems that move, biographers can now include the voices of their subjects as audio files, postmodern fiction writers can literalize post-structuralist notions of referentiality in their work through hypertext, the time-based aesthetics of film and performance and modes of interactivity once relegated to gaming are now also in the domain of writers. The possibilities are endless, and increase with each passing year, as new tools become available, and as they (many of them) become successively better designed and more accessible with each version release.

Publishing Without Publishers?
Further, with the growth of the global

network, our ideas of what publishing is or could be have begun to change. If by "publishing" we mean only the process of connecting readers with literary work, then the publishing industry is no longer necessary. While writers can't skip the processes of designing the work as a finished "object," promoting it to an audience, and distributing it globally, they can instead do it themselves. Many works of electronic literature have reached thousands of readers, and have been received critically around the world, without ever having been "published" in our old, formal sense of the word. Of course, in the absence of the publishing industry, the authors of these works have largely been unable to convert the growth of that readership to a profitable economy. While it is now certainly possible to describe one's vocation as "electronic writer," it is still a stretch to describe one's profession that way. The majority of the transactions that take place between an electronic writer and her readership are transactions of attention, not of cash. The writer offers the work, the reader the willingness to read it. The intercession of a cash transaction between these two steps is very rare indeed.

This lack of an economic infrastructure is both one of the principal challenges for electronic literature, and also one of its principal strengths. The meltdown of the dot com economy has had the effect of homogenizing the commercial Internet, of shaking out not only the bit players, but also those whose business models were not explicitly oriented towards commerce and near-term profitability. Many companies once hailed as the future of Web content — sites such as Suck, Feed, Inside, even the "new economy" flagship, The Industry Standard — have already vanished from the face of the Net. On the other hand, over the last several years, we have seen an explosion of creative activity in electronic literature, this art form that presently exists outside of reified economic structures. Indeed, as the young Web editors, designers, and programmers who once commanded generous salaries and stock options during the dot com boom have found themselves unemployed alongside many others of their generation, the economy of their own attention has changed. Many of them have responded to

the collapse of the dot coms not by abandoning the Internet, but instead turning back to it as a forum for creative expression, as a place to create not profit but art. If the new economy of the World Wide Web has vanished, the fact of the Internet remains, and the exuberance with which many of us approach the Internet has not dissipated, temporarily unfettered from the greed of its entrepreneurial companion.

Electronic literature's current state of detachment from commercial concerns poses challenges for many institutions located in different parts of our culture than Silicon Alley and Silicon Valley. It's a quandary: information wants to be free, and yet writers want to eat. The purpose of the Electronic Literature Organization, and a handful of other institutions, is in large part to help provide other kinds of support to this field that is developing outside of a for-profit economy.

My Seduction into Electronic Literature: How Did I Get Here?

The story of my own location at the crossroads of literature and technology starts here in Normal, Illinois, in fact in the labs and classrooms of Stevenson Hall, where this conference is taking place. While I had always been interested in literature that took technology and the effects that it has had on our culture as its subject — ranging from the Kurt Vonnegut, Orson Scott Card, and Harlan Ellison I read in high school to the Thomas Pynchon, Richard Powers, even the David Wallace and Curtis White that I was reading the early nineties — I didn't think a great deal about technology as a platform for or a medium of literature until I arrived here at Illinois State University in 1993. I was presented with my first email account on my arrival here. My first teaching experience, English 101, took place in a networked classroom. The assignments in my first graduate seminar, Ron Strickland's Seminar in 17th Century British Literature, were weekly position papers to be "handed in" to a mailing list that went to both the professor and my fellow students. At the same time as I was taking fiction writing workshops with Curt White and David Wallace, where I was encouraged to focus on things like the authenticity of my diction and the

Jamesian roundedness of my characters, back in Freshman Composition and in the Seventeenth Century, I was being taught to rethink the ways that we utilize technology as a communicative and literary medium.

Still, I was faithful to the word on the page, and saw the technology primarily as a pleasant diversion from the meatier tasks of writing for and reading from the printed page. In the fall of 1994, however, while I was enrolled in Jim Kalmbach's course in Visible Rhetoric, something happened that changed the course of my professional and creative life. One day Jim interrupted the course of our lab session to insist that we drop whatever we doing to take some freeware for a spin, an Internet application recently developed down the road at the NSCA in Champaign, something called the Mosaic browser. The first time I saw this graphical interface, with its links to more than one hundred different "sites," presented through a recognizable "page" metaphor, I found myself immediately enthralled with its potential as a publishing medium.

I wasn't quite sure what I would do with the World Wide Web, but the force of my curiosity was such that I knew that I must do something. In its earliest days, exploring the World Wide Web took on the quality of a scavenger hunt. I found that there were many people like me, interested in literature of the past and present who, moving from the "home page" that was the first widespread content impulse, were developing online resources about their favorite books, about their favorite writers, and that there was also a strong impulse to place their most valued reference resources online. With the exception of a few exemplary resources, such as Alan Liu's Voice of the Shuttle humanities portal <http://vos.ucsb.edu/>, there were, however, very few places on the Web where the majority of these resources could easily be accessed. So as I began my studies towards the Ph.D. at the University of Cincinnati in 1995, I also began developing a site called "Books in Chains" as a kind of hobby.

The Internet Archive Project that I'm utilizing right now, by the way, released this public interface, the "Internet Wayback Machine" earlier this year.

The project is an attempt to periodically archive as much of the Web as possible. The archive has its problems: for instance while it archives HTML, it cannot preserve the different applications and standards that were in place at a given time. External links are also problematic: these links of the past will deliver you not to the resources that they linked to in the past, but to those resources as they exist now, or more often, to a 404 error. Still, it's the most valuable and comprehensive publicly accessible attempt to date to preserve the World Wide Web as it existed in the past. I wish Brewster Kayley and his colleagues luck as they attempt not only to keep this vital project funded, but also to surmount the substantial copyright and intellectual property issues that any attempt to archive the entire Web will involve. As you can see, through archive.org, I'm able to give you at least a sense of the Books in Chains project, which no longer exists on the academic server where it used to reside.

The purpose of "Books in Chains" was to organize a large set of links to literary resources from around the Internet. It was a hobby that soon became quite time-consuming. The University of Cincinnati's English Department, while populated with sharp-minded faculty, operated within a much more traditional structure than that here at ISU. My work on the Internet had very little to do with the fiction writing, or studies in contemporary American fiction, drama and Irish literature I was engaged in at UC. And yet as I proceeded with my Web hobby, I found not only that my hobbywork was getting noticed and being utilized by thousands of people, but also that I was becoming part of a very energetic and devoted community of humanists, for whom the Internet represented an opportunity to share knowledge with each other, and with the (wired) world.

In late 1996, I got an email from someone representing a new venture called the

Mining Company, asking if I'd like to get paid for doing the kind of work that I was doing on "Books in Chains," by developing and maintaining a literature site for their portal, which would be developed by a network of expert independent contractors.

At first I thought this must be a scam, but after investigating further, I decided to give it a go. For the next three years, I served as the Authors guide at the Mining Company, which then became About.com before it was then swallowed up by the Primedia empire. At first this was a great experience: the company allowed the guides a great deal of autonomy. I was able to develop not only a link portal, but also an online book review, featuring intelligent reviews of contemporary literature written by a network of grad students and faculty across the country. We were able to review many books of value that were not getting press in the traditional organs, and to present those reviews to a substantial audience. Gradually, of course, the forces of commodification took hold: the company grew larger and then had its IPO. The content of About.com suffered drastically from the desires of its marketing executives, who were desperate to sell advertising at all costs. What was once one of the best subnetworks on the Web devolved into a pop-up-ad-driven nightmare, featuring little bits of knowledge layered into an offensive barrage of banal commerce. I ended my relationship with About.com in 2000, though they continued to use much of the content that I wrote, misattributed to another author, in cavalier violation of my contract and of copyright law.

The Power of Fun
My experiment in writing fiction created specifically for the Internet began in June of 1998, when my friend and fellow ISU alum William Gillespie and poet Dirk Stratton gathered in Cincinnati for a weekend of writing games.

We got together with the express intention of collaborating on a creative project, though we didn't quite know what

we wanted to do. After briefly discussing the idea of writing a screenplay (Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* meets Quentin Tarantino, if I recall correctly), we shucked that and instead decided that we should publish each other's existing work, borrowing from the collective publishing model of the Fiction Collective. It struck us that given recent advances in publishing technology, it would not be too great of a feat to put together, edit, and distribute a book ourselves, cutting out altogether the middleman and the publishing industry whose hoops and insider trading of favors we collectively despised. We arrived at the goal of our project: *The Unknown: An Anthology*, a book composed of unknown writing by unknown writers, that is, by us. Having come to this agreement, and not finding all of the work that we would like to include on-hand, we instead decided to try our hand at writing hypertext fiction. We reasoned that a short hypertext fiction about the book tour that we planned to go on after publishing the print anthology would serve as a great web-based promotional mechanism for the anthology itself. And would be fun, as well.

We underestimated the power of fun. Seventy-two hours later, we'd written some hundred scenes of what would become *The Unknown: A Hypertext Novel*. I think that it was not only the fun of writing about, poking fun at, ridiculing each other as fictional characters, nor the fun of lampooning our favorite writers and certain aspects of the media culture of the present, but also the discovery of hypertext as a mode of collaboration that drove us, not only for those sleepless night, but also through the summer and years which followed. In writing our silly road trip novel, we were discovering the network as a medium in its own right, one with staggering potential. Having finally (more or less) concluded writing *The Unknown, a Hypertext Novel* in late 2001, we recently printed *The Unknown: An Anthology*, bringing that circle to a close. While we're proud of this little collection, were we to print it in its entirety, the hypertext novel would dwarf our printbound work. The online project, begun as a slight comic offshoot of the print project, took on a life and

personality of its own.

*Coover Welcomes the Barbarians at the Gate*Less than a year after the project was initiated, Robert Coover selected *The Unknown* as co-winner of the 1998/99 trAce/AltX International Hypertext Competition, and invited us out to Brown for the Technology Platforms for 21st Century Literature Conference. This was a unique gathering, the first of its kind. I'm sure that many of you are familiar with Robert Coover's work as a novelist. He is one of the most prolific and intrepid writers of our time, the author of many innovative novels, short story collections and plays. A fact less known about Coover is that he will also be remembered as one of the great communitarians of 20th Century literature. Coover has been the friend not only of electronic literature and hypertext, but also the literary avant-garde, the postmodern, Latin American fiction, translation, and postcolonial literature, serving not only as a prolific author, but also helping to foster a sense of literary community. Coover is a builder not only of elaborative narrative structures, but also of literary movements. TP21CL in April of 1999 was his latest stab at energizing and motivating the community of hypertext writers he had adopted during the late eighties and shepherded since. For the purpose of this conference, Coover had teamed up with an old friend from his Midwestern years, Jeff Ballowe, who had had some success in the technology and Internet business, having led the launch of ZDNet before retiring in his early forties to work on the board of several Internet ventures. The main idea of the conference was to get the toolmakers together with the writers who were using the tools creatively. This made for some strange juxtapositions: the author of the first notable hypertext fiction, *afternoon, a story*, Michael Joyce, on one side of a table, the arrogant creator of Director and founder of Macromedia, Marc Cantor, on the other.

For William, Dirk and myself, this was both our first exposure to the world of technology executives, and our first exposure to the community of hypertext writers. We were surprised to find that there were quite intense divisions within this community of writers and scholars. I

think that Coover, in selecting the irreverent *Unknown* for the trAce/Alt-X award, might have been hoping to shake things up a bit. For some, *The Unknown* signified something frightening. Here was a hypertext novel, as substantial as anything written in the form, which was distributed not on under the imprimatur of the "serious" hypertext publisher Eastgate Systems on $20 CD-ROMs, but for free on the World Wide Web. Even more egregiously, this was a hypertext that did not in most respects take itself, hypertext theory, its authors, or anyone else seriously. Furthermore, before arriving at Brown, we had made an aesthetic decision to do our best to play the part of the troublemakers we described as characters in the novel, and so threw hotel parties every night, attempting to ply the few publishers and agents on hand with the several bottles of expensive liquor upon which my coauthor Dirk Stratton had expended his share of the prize money. We were the barbarians at the gate, and unfortunately noted hypertext theorist Jay David Bolter was staying in the suite next to our own. I recall one of the gathered literary lions referring to our work in a funerary tone as "that MTV garbage." Yet Coover seemed to be enjoying our antics immensely, as he himself was a troublemaker from way back.

Communitarian Impulse Actually Leads to Something

While the hypertext writers and theorists were mixing with the technologists at the conference like oil and water, the Unknown were more like vinegar, mixing (or not) equally well with the businesspeople (who were not like us) as we did with the tenured hypertext figures (who were also not like us). I found all of the work shown at the conference fascinating, and the various problems that were discussed during the conference sounded more like opportunities from my untutored perspective. At lunch on the final day of the conference, I was sitting with Jeff Ballowe and Robert Coover. Jeff asked if I had any ideas on how people in the tech industry might help electronic authors to produce more innovative work and to reach a wider audience. I pointed out that there was a nonprofit infrastructure for other art forms, and for

print literature, without which, for instance, poetry would have an even more marginal position in our culture. Jeff, who had worked with the nonprofit Illinois Arts Alliance in a previous life, agreed to help me put together a nonprofit organization to promote and facilitate the writing, publishing and reading of electronic literature provided I was willing to devote the time necessary to launch such an endeavor.

I went home and cashed in most of the few stock options I'd been awarded through my work with About.com, giving me a cushion to operate from for a few months. Jeff, Bob and I worked through several drafts of the proposal before gathering an impressive board of directors, which included some of the more innovative electronic writers, such as Stuart Moulthrop and Marjorie Luesebrink, publishing executives, such as Mark and Peter Bernstein, and importantly, literary nonprofit leaders including Bill Wadsworth who was at the time the executive director of the Academy of American Poets and Celia O'Donnell, who was at the time the executive director of the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses. Soon thereafter we gathered an Internet Industry Advisory Board, who generously provided us with the seed money necessary to launch the organization, and a Literary Advisory Board, including luminaries from the worlds of both print and electronic literature, who have loaned the organization both their prestige and a great deal of impassioned work in the years since. By September of 1999, we had incorporated The Electronic Literature Organization as an Illinois not-for-profit corporation and at the turn of the Millennium we launched the website <http://www.eliterature.org>, which has served as an information resource and community hub for electronic literature ever since.

The mission of the ELO is to promote and facilitate the writing, publishing, and reading of electronic literature. I tend to look at any of our programs in those terms: asking whether a given project or event will either promote or facilitate. During the first couple of years of the organization's life, much of our energy went to promoting both the work of electronic literature and the work of the organization. Our first events were focused on fundraising and on community building. During our first year, we held events in Chicago, New York and Seattle. While our attempt to shake some change from the pockets of the Microsoft millionaires in Redmond failed miserably, and even received a negative review in the *American Book Review*, our work in New York was far more successful, resulting in both a special issue of *Poets and Writers* devoted to new work in electronic literature, and in the initiation of a relationship with the Ford Foundation without which the ELO would not have survived the recent economic downturn. Late in 2000, we also launched the Electronic Literature Directory, the most comprehensive directory of work in the field, with annotated links to more than 800 works of electronic literature. The initial funding for this work came from technology companies and individuals. ZDNet and NBCi each made substantial contributions, which allowed us to employ me as executive director of the organization, and a network of independent contractors who built and have continued to develop the substantial tech infrastructure of the organization's websites.

A gift from ZDNet also made the 2001 Electronic Literature Awards possible. In the most substantial awards program in the field of electronic literature to date, our judges selected short-lists of six works of electronic literature in two categories, poetry and fiction, and awarded $10,000 prizes to the two winners, Londoner John Cayley for his morphing text HyperCard poetry "Windsound" and Canadian Caitlin Fisher for her web-based hypertext fiction, "These Waves of Girls."

Additionally in 2001, we intensified our Web activity and developed relationships with other organizations, such as the Boston Cyberarts Festival, NYU, the New School, Book Tech West, the Illinois Arts Council, the Illinois Humanities Council and the Chicago Humanities Festival, which enabled us to organize readings and events in other parts of the country. Unfortunately, early in 2001, the economic decline that began

in 2000 took its toll on the ELO. None of the individuals or technology companies who had supported the organization early on were thinking about philanthropy as they watched their own fortunes and those of their companies dwindle down to almost nothing.

Go West, Young Literary Nonprofit Organization

Thankfully, two parties stepped in to fill the void. Katherine Hayles, Professor of English and Design/Media Arts at UCLA and a member of the ELO Literary Advisory Board, hearing mere rumor that the ELO was considering moving from our modest offices in Chicago to a university home, very quickly mobilized and successfully lobbied UCLA to put together a generous offer, providing the organization with space, a graduate assistant, a small budget for office expenses and technological support for next five years. The ELO board gratefully accepted UCLA's offer in October of last year. We are now nicely nested within a major research institution, and can operate with a degree of security for at least the next five years. With the organization's move to LA, I stepped down as executive director but served as a consultant during the transition and helped to organize our first Symposium on the State of the Arts of electronic literature, held in April 2002 at UCLA, and I recently joined the ELO's board of directors.

The ELO's other angel came in the form of John Santos at the Ford Foundation's Media Arts and Culture program. The Ford Foundation provided us with a $100,000 grant, which supported the symposium and other recent activities of the organization. Santos has also helped us to lobby for the support of other foundations, including the Rockefeller Foundation, which is now supporting our directory project.

The recent symposium <http://www.eliterature.org/state/> was a great success: we were able to gather many of the leading writers, publishers, theorists and activists in the field for three days of concentrated discussions about specific issues, such as the problem of archiving digital culture, or the challenge of starting new graduate programs in electronic literature, during the day, and readings at night. The symposium was a stakeholders conference: we wanted to gather people who are not only passionate about the new forms but who are also actively working to make room for electronic literature in institutions ranging from small independent publishing houses to new university programs.

Looking forward to the next few years: I think that the following can be expected from the Electronic Literature Organization:

- We are redeveloping our Electronic Literature Directory with the support a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. We've the directory from a proprietary database format to open source, which will make it more durable. We've staffed the directory with research assistants, who will keep our records accurate and up to date. We're engaging translators to add records for some of the work being produced internationally in Spanish and French. In the future we'll also plan to add reader reviews and a file-sharing component.
- We'll soon publishing a book and CD-Rom project that will include the keynotes and some other papers from the State of the Arts Symposium, audio files of the entire conference proceedings, and additionally the majority of the works short-listed for the 2001 Electronic Literature Awards.
- We've just begun the planning stages for a major initiative that will likely be the mainstay of our programming for the next five years. Our Preservation, Archiving and Dissemination program, designed to address many of the challenges of preserving, and making accessible for both scholarly edification and for a general readership, these works of electronic literature that are currently in danger of technological obsolescence from

the moment they are created. In April 2003 the University of California at Santa Barbara will host a small working conference, the purpose of which will be not only to foreground these issues, but also to generate a plan of attack towards solving them through technological solutions, as well as through institutional and cultural practices.

- We plan to organize future symposia similar to the 2002 State of the Arts Symposium on a biannual basis.
- We hope to hold the Electronic Literature Awards again in the future. An Internet company, ZDNet provided the funding for the 2001 Awards. Corporate funding for literary nonprofits has largely dried up in the recent economic climate, but we are seeking other partners to renew this important program.
- We will continue our practice of working with other organizations and with the media to organize readings, events and promotional activity for and about electronic literature.

Recent Work in Electronic Literature

Here is a smattering of locations on the network where you can find some intriguing experiments in literature for the computer and the network. These links are organized by individual works, e-lit publishers, journals and reviews, and meta-resources.

These selections don't necessarily represent "the best of" electronic literature, but I hope that they'll give you a sense of the range of approaches that writers are taking to creating work specific to the computer and network.

Individual Works

These Waves of Girls by Caitlin Fisher
<www.yorku.ca/caitlin/waves/>

The winner of the 2001 Electronic Literature Award for Fiction, Caitlin Fisher's These Waves of Girls is a hypertext novella about girlhood, identity, cruelty, sexuality and secrets. Larry McCaffery, the fiction judge who selected the work for the award, found that " . . . the writing in these narrative shards (many of which are sharply etched enough to draw blood) is by turns, tender, terrifying, erotic, lyrical, witty, surprising -- and always emotionally engaging."

"riverIsland" by John Cayley
<http://homepage.mac.com/shadoof/>

John Cayley, the British e-poet who won the 2001 Electronic Literature Award for poetry for his transliteral morphing HyperCard text-movie Windsound, advanced his project further with the release this year of riverIsland, a series of poems based on translations of Eighth Century Chinese poet Wang Wei's "Wang River Sequence." The HyperCard work uses Quicktime VR as a device to navigate through this quietly meditative multilingual multimedia poetryscape. (Mac only).

Email Literature by Alan Sondheim
<http://www.eliterature.org/interactions/starthere/work-alansondheim.shtml>

The avant garde is dead. Long live the avant garde. Alan Sondheim's performative email practice is either genius or madness or both simultaneously. Sondheim is probably the most prolific writer working in electronic media today, and his work is delightfully strange.

"Alternumerics" by Paul Chan
<http://nationalphilistine.com/alternumerics/>

Writer/designer/political activist Paul Chan's Alternumerics is conceptually brilliant. The work consists of a series of fonts in which each keystroke represents not a letter but a phrase, a bit of handwriting, or a measure of white space. The result is something between fiction, design and conceptual art.

"Exhale" by Orit Kruglanski and Raquel Paricio
<www.soymenos.com/respira/exhale/>

To read this poem in its entirety, the reader must "breathe life into it." As the reader blows gently into the microphone, the words float around and assemble with the flow of the reader's breath. It's an ingenious idea for an interface, and the content of the poem relates thematically to the process of interacting with the poem. (Mac only).

Blue Company by Rob Wittig
<www.tank20.com>

Rob Wittig's subscription serial email novel Blue Company saw its second performance in 2002. Subscribers received a epistle in their inbox every day for a month from Berto Alto, a copywriter who had been transferred by his company through time and space to 14th Century Italy. As he has so adroitly in previous works, Wittig successfully mixed genres of the past with the media of the future in this engaging email novel. A preview is available online.

The Iliad by Homer, Barry Smylie and collaborators
<barrysmylie.com/iliad/iliad000.htm>

An ambitious project retelling Homer's Iliad, using contemporary imagery and flash animations, taking artistic advantage of multimedia to make a classic tale accessible to a new audience.

Mysteries and Desire: Searching the Worlds of John Rechy by Marsha Kinder and the Labyrinth Project
<http://www.annenberg.edu/labyrinth/electronic.html>

A project centering on the life and work of novelist John Rechy, this CD-ROM project attempts to reconceptualize the memoir genre for the electronic media. Produced by the Labyrinth Project, an interactive offshoot of the University of Southern California film school, Mysteries and Desires has high production values.

"The Doll Games" by Shelley and Pamela Jackson
<www.ineradicablestain.com/dollgames>

Shelley Jackson, the author of the groundbreaking Storyspace hypertext Patchwork Girl and the recent print collection The Melancholy of Anatomy, teamed up with her sister, Rhetoric Ph.D. Pamela Jackson, to produce this by turns hilarious, thought-provoking, and extensively self-referential examination of the games the two used to play with their modified and mutilated dolls during their youth in seventies Berkeley. The best metafiction I've read in years.

Newspoetry
<www.newspoetry.com>

This Urbana, Illinois-based writing collective founded by William Gillespie and edited by Joe Futrelle, has been presenting "all the news that scans" for four years running. Each day, Newspoetry presents a new poem (or text of some kind) presenting a reaction to the news of the day.

E-Lit Publishers

Eastgate Systems
<www.eastgate.com>

Eastgate is the oldest, best, and essentially the only commercial publisher of hypertext literature. Its stable includes classics such as Shelley Jackson's Patchwork Girl, Michael Joyce's afternoon, a story, and Stuart Moulthrop's Victory Garden, as well as new work including Judd Morrisey and Lori Talley's stunning My Name is Captain, Captain.

Alt-X
<www.altx.com>

The Alt-X online publishing network is home to a variety of elit, net art, and avant garde publishing projects, including Hyper-X and most recently Alt-X press, an experiment in free e-book/pay-for Print On Demand publishing. Copyleft central.

Spineless Books
<www.spinelessbooks.com>

A 2002 word palindrome, a 50,000 word lipogram, the print remnants of Invisible Seattle, a 20 Consonant Funk Song MP3, the Table of Forms, and may other surprises. Spineless is a publishing model based on the strange delights of eccentric language in several media.

Journals and Reviews

The Electronic Book Review
<www.electronicbookreview.com>

The Electronic Book Review, edited by Joseph Tabbi, is the best place to find serious criticism of electronic literature and digital culture on the Web, presented in an ingenious remix-friendly database interface.

The Iowa Review Web
<www.uiowa.edu/~iareview/mainpages/tirweb.html>

The new incarnation of the Iowa Review Web, edited by Thomas Swiss, promises to be a great resource for e-lit readers, featuring interviews with and essays about the work of some of the more interesting writers in the field.

Poems that Go
<www.poemsthatgo.com>

Poems that Go is the place to go for kinetic poetry, time-based motion graphics, reactive media, Flash & Quicktime poems, whatever you may want to call them, poems that go.

Beehive
<beehive.temporalimage.com>

From hypertext to codework to flash fiction to plaintext to prose for the Palm Pilot, the five online volumes of Beehive marry excursions into the nether territories of narrative and signification with exquisite design.

Drunken Boat
<www.drunkenboat.com>

Drunken Boat presents a refreshing mix of the traditional lit mag staples: fiction, poetry, expository writing and photography, with sound and Web art in a mélange that could only work on the network.

Meta-Resources

The Electronic Literature Directory
<directory.eliterature.org>

The Electronic Literature Organization's directory can guide you to hundreds of experiments in digital writing.

Rhizome
<www.rhizome.org>
Rhizome has long been for Net Art what the Electronic Literature hopes to be for E-Lit: a catalyst, resource, community center and gallery space. You're always sure to find some exciting new interfaces, compelling discourse, and fresh art at Rhizome.