Scott Rettberg's Remarks for the UK Launch of the
Electronic Literature Collection, Volume One
at the Institute of Creative Technologies in Leicester, England
May 17, 2007

First of all I'd like to thank Chris Joseph, Sue Thomas, and all of you at

the Institute of Creative Technologies for having this event to launch the

Electronic Literature Collection in the UK. Speaking on behalf of the

Electronic Literature Organization and the other editors of the *Collection*,

we are very grateful to you for hosting this event. We've also been very

grateful for the partnership of trAce over the past eight years. The ELO

and trAce have shared a special relationship that in my opinion was far

more productive than that between George Bush and Tony Blair. We at the

ELO have been more than a bit broken up to see our partner organization

dissolve, to become merely a trace of trAce, so I can't say how pleased I

am to see many of the stars of that constellation are regrouping here in

Leicester at the Institute and at De Montfort University, where you are

continuing to promote and to work on the development of new media

writing in the United Kingdom.

The main reason that I'm here today is to present you with, and to

entice you to read, consider, share, and perhaps teach the *Electronic*

Literature Collection, Volume One, a collection of sixty works of

electronic literature that was recently published by the Electronic

Literature Organization and which is available for free both online at

collection.eliterature.org and on CD-ROM. The *Collection*, edited by N. Katherine Hayles, Nick Montfort, Stephanie Strickland, and myself, constitutes a broad introduction to the field of electronic literature, and includes representative work of a variety of forms of digital writing including hypertext fictions, kinetic poetry, combinatory forms, interactive fiction, and narrative animations. As the title indicates, it is our hope that this first collection of sixty works will only be the first in an ongoing serial of anthologies of electronic literature, to be published on a biannual basis.

The mission of the Electronic Literature Organization is to promote and facilitate the writing, publishing, and reading of electronic literature. As an ELO project, the most important aspect of the ELC is that it should serve to more widely disseminate e-lit. At least for this first iteration of the project, we felt it was very important that the *Collection* be made available for free, both in the sense of free speech and in the sense of free beer, so we asked all of the contributing authors to make their work available under a Creative Commons license. The *Collection* itself and all of the works included within it are published under a Creative Commons attribution non-commercial license, which means that you may feel free, for instance, to install the *Collection* on every computer in your school's computer lab without paying any licensing fees. If you like a particular work in the *Collection*, you can feel free to email it or burn it to CD for a friend. What we care most about is expanding the audience and cultural context of

electronic writing. We also felt that it was important, for the first time, to make available a fairly large collection of electronic literature so that educators can send students to one place where stable copies of a variety of works will remain, rather than having to hunt around and pull together a semester's worth of source texts from around the Web and from previously published CD-ROMs. We felt that having this many works alongside each other will make it easier for students to spot and discuss themes, trends and patterns within this mode of cultural production.

Another important aspect of the *Collection* is simply to provide writers of electronic literature who create remarkable or exceptional works with a place of honor, a publication venue in which their work undergoes a process of editorial review and selection. About 40% of the submissions for the first volume of the ELC were included in the finished volume. While the ELC should not be understood as a "canon" of electronic literature, the works included were carefully reviewed and recognized as worthy by the editors. Although there are online journals and a culture in which electronic literature is appreciated and shared online, at conferences, readings, and other venues, this is a creative culture that exists outside of any sort of traditional market economy, or the types of publishing structures familiar from print culture. There is only one traditionally structured for-profit publisher of electronic literature, Eastgate Systems,

and it no longer publishes new work with any frequency. So there is an important "credentialing" function to the *Electronic Literature Collection*.

The project also serves a very important archival function. Just as is the case with many other kinds of digital artifacts, there are many problems with the preservation of electronic literature that we are just now beginning to address. These problems range from platform shifts to hardware accessibility to the loss of the bits themselves. Some authors simply let URLs expire and lose track of the projects they have created. While a project like the ELC does not address all of the problems involved in archiving electronic literature, most archivists agree that the more copies of digital artifacts that are distributed the more widely, the more likely they will be to survive. The interface of the ELC is also designed in a standards-compliant way, with valid XHTML in the manner recommended in the ELO's *Acid-Free Bits*, with no proprietary technology, so at least the structure of the *Collection* is likely to be durable and to be platform-independent.

Finally, publishing the *Collection* in both CD-ROM and online form makes files accessible/searchable for a different kind of scholarly access, a kind of what Matthew Kirschenbaum calls "forensic reading" rather than simple web reading. The reader can more easily look at the directory structure, view the source files, and thus come to a better understanding of how these things are made.

During the eight years that I've been involved with the ELO, there have been several "centering moments" – the 2001 Electronic Literature Awards, the 2002 State of Arts Symposium, and now the 2006 *Collection*. In comparison to previous "centering moments," in this case we saw just as many submissions as there were for the $10,000 awards in 2001, and this time found that more of them were "legitimate" works of electronic literature, not just ebooks that remediate the experience of reading print literature. There were also fewer submissions of hypertext, and more of entirely new forms of electronic writing, including some didn't even exist ten years ago. The focus in our selections was on representing a broad overview of different types of types of work in this diverse field. The process of getting submissions was a combination of open submission and direct invitation to submit work. We accepted only works that would function in a stand-alone environment. We did not include any work unless there was unanimous agreement among the editors that it should be included.

The publication and distribution of the *Electronic Literature Collection*, Volume One involved a great deal of collaboration by individual and institutional members of our community. The project was funded by institutional partners including the Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing at the University of Pennsylvania, ELINOR: Electronic Literature in the Nordic Countries, MITH: Maryland Institute

for Technology in the Humanities at the University of Maryland, the Division of Arts and Humanities at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota, and the College of Letters and Science English Department, at the University of California, Los Angeles. These partners each contributed a small donation of about $1,000 to support the ELC, or contributed other institutional resources. In return, the sponsors were acknowledged on the case of the CD-ROM, and were each sent fifty copies for their use and for that of their students. The most significant benefit to the sponsoring partners is that their programs get recognition as significant players in the field of new media via their association with the project, in addition to helping to create a valuable curricular resource for their students and community. It's also important to note the generosity of the contributing authors, whom agreed to submit their work under a Creative Commons license, in effect to share it with the world.

The web version of the *Electronic Literature Collection*, Volume One has been widely utilized by readers, writers, educators, and students worldwide. In addition, the CD-ROM version has been distributed to the membership, board, and literary advisory board of the ELO, to interested readers at a number of events including launch events in Philadelphia, Bergen, and Leicester, as well as at a number of academic conferences including the MLA, the AWP, E-Poetry, and others. Copies of the CD-

ROM were also sent to the academic partner institutions who sponsored the *Collection* and who now use it in their curricula. CD-ROMs will also be made available at related conferences attended by ELO board members. The project has been publicized via web and email channels, in addition to traditional press releases and personal correspondence to targeted journalists. The project has now been reviewed in a number of newspapers and online publications related to the field, and we expect more in coming months. The *Collection* was also noted internationally in weblogs in a number of different languages including Polish, French, English, German, Norwegian, Portuguese, Italian, and Spanish, and copies of the CD-ROM have been requested and mailed to readers on five different continents. A CD-ROM of the *Electronic Literature Collection*, Volume One is also going to be included in Katherine Hayles' forthcoming book *Electronic Literature: Playing, Interpreting, and Teaching*, from Notre Dame University Press, to be published in fall 2007. The project has been the subject of several lengthy reviews and articles in publications including *The Philadelphia Enquirer*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, *El Pais*, *Der Standard*, *The Hyperliterature Exchange*, *Furtherfield*, and *Realtime Arts*. It is an interesting indication of the project's international audience that of these seven substantial reviews of the *Collection*, only one was from the USA, while five were from Europe and one from Australia. If we think about electronic literature as a literary movement, it is an international one.

The current moment for electronic literature is a very exciting one, particularly on this side of the Atlantic. If we just look at recent and upcoming conferences and colloquia within the past few and upcoming months, we find a conference on digital literature in Jyvaskyla, Finland, the recent ELO Symposium in Maryland, this event in Leicester, the EPoetry Conference in Paris, and the Remediating Literature conference coming up in Utrecht. At the ELO symposium we had an international panel that included representatives of nt2 from Montreal, Hermenia from Catalonia, Juan Gutierrez from Spain, and Elinor from the Nordic countries, and saw works of electronic literature in seven different languages. Another wonderful outcome of that event was that representatives of the Library of Congress were there and have asked for the ELO's help in archiving works of electronic literature, choosing in effect to include electronic literature in the USA's central library.

Rita Raley, Brian Stefans, and Talan Memmott have volunteered to serve as the next editorial board for Volume Two of the *Collection*, and we expect to issue a call for works for Volume Two in the autumn of this year for the next edition to be published in 2008.

Finally, on the slate of readers tonight: John Cayley, winner of the 2001 Electronic Literature Award, one of the best-known poets in the field, master of the textual instrument/instrumental text, a creator of literal art. Jon Ingold, longtime author of interactive fiction, is representing what

may be the oldest ongoing form of electronic literature. Chris Joseph, whose beautifully designed flash-based work is representative of the combinatory and Dadaist impulse in electronic literature and crossover between elit and other multimedia art forms. Kate Pullinger, with a work of electronic literature that has a great deal to say to younger audiences, hinting at the promises of electronic literature for younger readers or as a part of a multimedia educational environment. This is a great slate of authors, and a great representation of the diversity of the *Collection* and of the field itself. I look forward to the readings.