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Developing an Identity for the Field of Electronic Literature Reflections on the Electronic Literature Organization Archives

By Scott Rettberg

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Abstract

The Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) was founded as a literary nonprofit organization in 1999 after the Technology Platforms for 21st Century Literature conference at Brown University. Along with Jeff Ballowe and Robert Coover, I was a co-founder of the ELO, and served as its first Executive Director from 1999-2001, and have served on its board of directors in the years since then. Today it is one of the most active organizations in the field of electronic literature, central to the practice of e-lit in the United States and its establishment as an academic discipline. This essay briefly outlines the early history of the organization, the ways that the mission, profile, and the focus of the organization evolved and changed in its first decade, and offers some tentative insights into the ways that an institutionally structured community can facilitate network-mediated art practice.

The discussion is based on archival materials, including notes taken prior to the incorporation of the Organization. By revisiting these materials and recounting the process by which the organization took shape, I will describe aspects of the iterative and deliberative process through which a collective institutional identity took shape. Although certain aspects of the organizational structure have remained stable since its formation, its mission, scope, programs, and constituency have changed and evolved a great deal during the period. Taking into account, for instance, that the organization was initiated during the final stages of the 1999 dot com boom primarily as an artist-based organization and has evolved ultimately into a professional academic organization with successful programs including an ongoing series of conferences and publications, it is useful to consider the organization as an evolving community. Even the shifts that took place between the time that the organization was initially conceived and its incorporation are instructive for understanding how a nascent creative community-based organization can change and evolve during its gestation.

The decisions about composition, mission, and programs of the Electronic Literature Organization have been non-trivial in their effects, contributing in a large degree to the conception of electronic literature and the discourse models of the field more generally. The widening breadth of the genres of electronic literature, the professionalization of its academic discourse, and to some degree the credentialing of creative practice have been facilitated by programs of ELO.

The Origin of the ELO 1999-2000

During 1998 and 1999, while I was a graduate student enrolled at the Ph.D. program in English and Comparative Literature at the University of Cincinnati, studying 20th Century American Literature and fiction writing, I wrote a collaborative hypertext novel with William Gillespie, Frank Marquardt, and Dirk Stratton titled The Unknown. In 1999, novelist Robert Coover selected the novel as the co-winner of the trAce/Alt-X hypertext competition of that year¹, and invited us to Brown University for the Technology Platforms for 21st Century Literature (TP21CL) conference he convened there from April 7-9, 1999.

The idea of the TP21CL conference was to bring together both established e-writers such Michael Joyce, Jay Bolter, Deena Larsen, Stuart Moulthrop, Stephanie Strickland, M.D. Coverley (Marjorie Coverley Luesebrink), and Rob Wittig as well as relative unknowns creating new work on the Web together with technologists and technology industry people: a group led by Jeff Ballowe, who helped Coover organize the conference, included for instance the editor of PC Magazine, the founder of Macromedia, and a number of people who were leading dot com companies at the height of the 1990s boom, as well as some publishers. The premise of this gathering was that a dialog about new platforms and tools might result, and perhaps even the development of new platforms for the creation of electronic literature. The contingents of writers and technologists, somewhat predictably, did not easily mix.

I was new to both the world of digital writing and the world of the technology industry, so both groups seemed equally strange and fascinating communities, each with their own references, histories, mythologies, internal conflicts, and so on. I had familiarized myself to some extent with hypertext fiction, but the whole universe of e-lit was still largely mysterious to me.

During the conference banquet, I found myself sitting at a table with Coover and Ballowe, who were both to some extent disappointed in the way that aspects of the two-day event had transpired. Ballowe asked me if I had any ideas about how these two groups might work together. As a graduate student / hungry artist type, it

seemed obvious to me that one possibility would be for the Internet companies (which appeared to be swimming in unfathomably deep pools of money at that point in history) to find ways to support the new art forms and to apply some capital to the situation of experimental literature. I could imagine further e-lit competitions, like those organized for American poetry by the Academy of American Poets, specifically for electronic literature. I could imagine programs to make commercial software available for free or at a lower price for artists. I could imagine various forms of outreach activities to publicize and make more accessible electronic literature to a wider reading public. I could see the usefulness of a non-profit organization for electronic literature, modeled to some extent on existing literary non-profit organizations.

To my surprise, both Ballowe and Coover embraced these ideas. Ballowe encouraged me to write them up in a business plan, and told me that if Coover and the community of electronic literature authors would support the development of this kind of organization, he would agree to help with the fundraising: provided, that is, that someone would be willing to do the work at the grass-roots level. By someone he meant me, and that is the very short version of how I became the first executive director of the ELO. In the months that followed, I worked with Ballowe, Coover, and members of the e-lit community such as Marjorie Luesebrink, Deena Larsen, Stephanie Strickland, and others to put together the initial plan for the organization, to incorporate as a 501(c)3 nonprofit, to organize a board of directors, literary, and technology advisory board, and to launch the first of the ELO's programs.

The first three years of the ELO were a turbulent and exciting period, during which an institutional identity took shape. Historically we can also recall that it was a period during which America went from Internet boom to dot com crash, to the soul-wrenching event of 9/11 and its societal aftermath. I was recently going through some notes and archival materials from that time, including my first notes towards the ELO proposal, which form the basis of this discussion. Since this is a Web-based journal where such things are possible, I will also attach facsimiles of some of these materials. Though I focus here on that earliest period, I will also detail other aspects of the first decade of the ELO's history, with an eye toward the future of the organization.

After writing *The Unknown* with Dirk and William my surprised first impression of the electronic literature community (or communities) was that it was quite fragmented. I think most who were working in the field at the time would agree that this was the case. In many ways e-lit genres and practices in the US were more clearly divided than they are today. There seemed to be a "hypertext crowd" dominated by authors, mostly fiction writers, who had published work with Eastgate, and a separate "e-poetry crowd." While there was some interaction between these two communities, work and authors rarely seemed to cross between them. The

“interactive fiction” crowd seemed to be in an entirely different universe—hypertext authors seem to have been eager to differentiate the type of work they were doing from games. At the TPC21CL conference, there was also a notable division between people who were writing hypertext for the Web and those who had been working exclusively in Storyspace. One of the reasons we ultimately chose, in naming the Electronic Literature Organization, to go with the very general “electronic literature” term rather than hypertext or some other more taxonomically specific term was that we wanted the new organization to bridge those gaps and divisions which seemed to be largely artificial and certainly not productive in the sense of representing new media writing as an emergent cultural practice to be taken seriously.

If we think back to the atmosphere of 1999: interest in the Internet had exploded and we were in the midst of the boom period for the dot coms, but the net was still extremely novel, and most people had really only begun to integrate its use into their lives. There were no widely used online social networks, for example. The “home page” was still the default mode of self-representation on the Web. Coding HTML was still a valued skill—people could get a job as a web designer or developer with very minimal technical knowledge.

In retrospect I think we can see that period as one in which hypertext fiction was essentially devolving as a specific genre, and during which its most significant “legitimate” publisher², Eastgate Systems, was struggling to keep pace with the popular adoption of the Web. Eastgate’s Storyspace is a specific platform that was used for the production of many of the early hypertext fictions, and while there is wide diversity in the styles of writing that authors produced in that platform, the authoring environment and the user interface enforced certain shared characteristics on the works produced in Storyspace. The fact that one publisher released Storyspace works also framed those works within a particular aesthetic and marketing logic. Eastgate promoted itself as the publisher of “serious hypertext.” When I met the publisher at TP21CL and heard stories from a number of authors who had published with Eastgate, I had doubts. Authors I spoke with at TP21CL publishing with Eastgate reported poor marketing support for their work, rights conflicts with the publisher, and even already at that stage, issues of technological obsolescence. Aside from the credentialing function and limited editorial support, I could not see how publishing with Eastgate could better serve authors than open distribution on the World Wide Web, where their work could be made more widely and freely available to audiences. Yet whether or not it was to play the specific function of publishing electronic literature, it seemed clear to me that an organization could fill some of the gaps between the seemingly-already-obsolete model of publishing offered by Eastgate and the completely DIY, anything-goes, freewheeling anarchy of the early Web: a mediating layer of organized community rather than a for-profit publishing enterprise.

The First Drafts of the Electronic Literature Organization

Here are the first notes I took in 1999, a day after the TPC21CL conference, which would later evolve into a proposal for the ELO. I will transcribe them here, but also attach scans of these hand-written notes:

The equivalent of a non-profit press for free, web-distributed hypertext literature.

1. A consortium, which could provide hypertext authors with:
2. a central distribution point for their work,
3. a mechanism for the promotion of their work,
4. access to the latest tools and technologies,
5. authenticity via a refereed process,
6. new alliances within established literary and technological communities,
7. based on a collective model, in which authors retain copyright and control of their work,
8. would emphasize hypertext as a literature that emerges from, rather than in opposition to, our shared literary heritage,
9. would serve an “evangelical” function—by organizing live events across the US and the world,
10. could provide lucid and concise criticism of hypertext in ordinary language,
11. along these lines, such an organization could also publish in more traditional media—book and CD-ROM—thus providing “hard-copy” references for libraries, universities etc.
12. such an organization would not necessarily be tied to any particular aesthetic—would emphasize an “open-source” approach to hypertext not tied to any particular theoretical (agenda), [and]
13. could work with established hypertext communities and companies, for the interests of the field as a whole.

www.hyperlit.org

The equivalent of a non-profit press for free, web-distributed hypertext literature.

A consortium which could provide hypertext authors with:

- A) a central distribution point for their work
- B) a mechanism for promotion of their work
- C) access to the latest tools and technologies
- D) authenticity via a referral process
- E) new alliances within established literary and technological communities
- F) based on a collective model, in which authors retain copyright and control of their work
- G) Would emphasize hypertext as a literature which emerges from, rather than in opposition to, our shared literary heritage
- H) Would serve an "unofficial" function - by author's live events across the US and the world.
- I) Could provide lived and concise criticism of hypertext in ordinary language
- J) Along these lines, such an organization could also publish in more traditional media - book + CD-ROM - the primary "hard-copy" references for libraries, communities etc.
- K) Such an org would not necessarily be tied to any particular aesthetic - would emphasize

Rettberg, Scott. www.hyperlit.org. 10 Apr. 1999. Handwritten notes.

Also among my notes from the TPC21CL are some "Conceptual Statements on Hypertext," a sort of mini-manifesto that also reveals some aspects of my thinking about electronic literature at that time.

Conceptual Statements on Hypertext

1. Our understanding of the basic grammar of hypertext - link structures - still remains to be deeply explored.

2. Hypertext should not be understood as a new genre, but as something that will become multiple genres.
3. Hypertext is evolving into an ideal mode of collaboration – it is more naturally suited to multi-perspectival approaches.
4. Hypertext is less limited by technology than by imagination. The problem is one of making choices, limiting foci, and choosing paths for exploration.
5. Hypertext will enable new forms collaboration between different kinds of artists working in multiple media. Hypertext literature will involve “text” of multiple types. Hypertext will enable micro-movements” of consensual communities of artists on a previously unimaginable scale. Varieties of convergence will create new forms for theorists to taxonomize.
6. SIDE NOTE: What would a hypertext opera look and sound like? How would it progress?
7. At this stage, more energy should be devoted to the kind of improvisational play that will generate new forms than the taxonomies, which will delimit them. Now is the time for artists to play with each other.
8. Hypertext is by nature kinetic.
9. Hypertext and print culture are not mutually exclusive. Hypertext is not the end of the book—it is a new form of literature, which is different from the book. Print and electronic literary cultures should be symbiotic and not antagonistic.
10. More hypertexts need to be free. People like free stuff. In order to generate a popular following for the new literature, we need to work to make it more accessible to readers (I haven’t read any of the Eastgate hypertexts because I’ve been in graduate school. To my knowledge, they are not available at my university library. That is a problem).

I later sketched some of these ideas into a draft proposal, and sent them on to Ballowe and Coover. Working most closely with Ballowe, I developed the proposal and an organizational plan. I was able to find an interim draft of that proposal, for an organization, which by this stage had morphed from “hyperlit.org” to “The Electronic Literature Foundation.” As a side-note, I think Jeff Ballowe deserves some credit for the organization’s adoption of the term “electronic literature”—we discussed the fact that “hypertext” as it was popularly understood at that moment was not really a broad enough term to address the different literary forms we could imagine such an organization supporting and promoting, and further, might sound technical and alienating to the broader non-specialist audience we were hoping to cultivate as a readership. This might be an interesting detail for some scholars interested in the choice of the term “electronic literature”: it was chosen not for its

specificity but its generality. I think Coover noted at the time that there was something “charmingly old-fashioned” about the term. The term sounded nostalgic from the first day it was used: we didn’t want to scare readers away by throwing neologisms at them that sounded like something sent back from an intimidating cybertextual sci-fi future. “Electronic literature”³ is less a taxonomical category than a welcoming umbrella under which many types of creative production involving machines and literature might take place.

I attach this draft proposal for the “Electronic Literature Foundation”⁴. This document is largely the product of my dialogue with Ballowe as well with consultations with potential corporate funders and non-profit experts, as well as with other e-lit writers, particularly during the “Cybermountain Colloquium” convened by Deena Larsen from May 28-June 2, 1999 near Denver, Colorado.



Banner for the Cybermountain Colloquium website.

Larsen, Marjorie Luesebrink, Stephanie Strickland, N. Katherine Hayles, Mark Bernstein, and Bill Bly all gave me input after I presented the proposal to them. Some of these ideas were integrated into the proposal, and Luesebrink and Strickland, in particular, stayed in close contact as the project developed. Both have been deeply involved in the development of the ELO ever since. Deena Larsen was also key to developing the original membership and community of the ELO. When we incorporated, Luesebrink agreed to serve as the first Vice-President of the organization, and subsequently engineered the ELO’s move from Chicago to UCLA in 2002 and served as its second President.

In reviewing this proposal, it is important to understand that Ballowe’s primary occupation at the time was helping to launch Internet companies. We were not thinking of putting together a small volunteer-driven non-profit but something of sizable scale that would operate with an annual budget of about a million dollars. The programs would include a professionally staffed and produced online magazine, Electronic Literature, annual electronic literature competitions, a “Tools for Writers” program, symposia and reading tours, and advisory functions for education, publishers, and the technology industry. The organization we conceived at that time would require a staff of ten, including an executive director, a network supervisor/programmer, a development director, a senior producer, a senior editor,

a programs director, a publicist, a graphic designer, a staff writer, and an office administrator. We made no small plans, though in comparison to the budgets of Internet start-ups that Ballowe was accustomed to assembling and finding venture capital for at the time, a million dollar annual budget is small potatoes.

Though the ELO has never had anything approaching the budget that the initially proposed endeavor would require, and has accomplished a great deal over time without such resources, I will be the first to say that it should have such resources, in an ideal setting. I think the organization would be able to accomplish a great deal with all of those positions staffed.

An important transition is already notable from my very first notes to this draft proposal: from a focus on the concerns of writers to the more general concern of building an audience for electronic literature (of interest not only of writers but also publishers and technology industry). That is while my first notes were oriented towards specific concerns that I had as a budding author of e-lit (and that I shared with other writers), the draft proposal was very much the product of dialogue with a number of different groups of what we might in grant language call "stakeholders": the proposal had by then been through several rounds of feedback from Jeff Ballowe, who was reviewing the document both as a potential fundraiser with a venture capitalist's sense of what could and not could be funded, and as a former executive of Ziff-Davis, a publisher that had built a magazine-and-online publishing empire around the technology industry. So it is not a surprise that certain aspects of this proposal, such as the idea for a dynamic Electronic Literature online magazine, were emphasized.

While my initial notes were more focused on integrating electronic literature with literary culture as I (as a young academic and fiction writer, habituated to used bookstores, lectures, and late-night poetry readings) understood it, at this point the proposal had been tempered both by Ballowe's feedback and by input received from meetings in New York with people active in the publishing industry, such as Peter Bernstein and Alexandra Penny, literary nonprofits, such as William Wadsworth at the Academy of American Poets and Celia O'Donnell at the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses, and people in the Internet industry, such as Gene DeRose, who was at the time the CEO of the dot com Jupiter Media Metrix. So in many senses, the ELO as it was initially formed was not based primarily on the input of academics, but more so on models from the publishing and technology industries. The first funding the ELO received in fact was not from traditional non-profit source such as a foundation, but a gift from Robert Ziff, of Ziff-Davis, and the second major injections of funding we received were from NBCi, a corporation that no longer exists, and ZDNet, an Internet company which funded the 2001 Electronic Literature Awards competition.

From the beginning of the ELO there was a tension between different constituencies with different goals, even with different paradigms of conceptualizing both electronic literature and the community we were in the process of constituting. Because the ELO was bringing together so many different interest groups, core questions of our collective identity were not immediately resolved. Would the ELO become a publisher? an advocacy organization? an academic organization? a bridge between the publishing or technology industry and writers?

My first impulse was to think of the ELO as a community-supported publishing organization and as an advocacy organization focused on increasing the readership of electronic literature. The original vision of the ELO was focused on providing ways for writers to reach a greater audience, and to make it easier for writers to work in electronic environments. It is interesting to me in retrospect how little of our activity in the early days of the ELO was academic. This is in part because of the constituency of the organization at the time: we had a mix of business people from the technology industry, literary nonprofit experts, such as Bill Wadsworth, and writers involved in the organization. While a few of the people involved were established academics, and while there was a literary advisory board that included a number of writers and academics, the early ELO was not an academic organization. Our first headquarters were not at a university, but a low-rent office in an industrial loft, over a precision gear factory in the Ravenswood neighborhood of Chicago. This small, unfinished office space was subleased from a two-person marketing consultancy, and shared a block of the factory building with a number of artist studios: our office-mates included painters, a ceramicist, and a weaver.

I have attached the first [brochure](#) produced by the ELO in 2000, which provides an impression of both the organizational structure of the ELO at the time and our initial objectives and programs (many of which were never realized). One first observation is that over a remarkably short period of time, we managed to pull together a remarkable group of people, representing a number of different constituencies. We constituted three separate boards including a board of directors, an "Internet Industry Advisory Board," and a "Literary Advisory Board." Each of these groups was conceived of as representing a different constituency, and as serving a different role within the organization. In comparison to the board of the ELO as it is currently composed in 2012, it remarkable how few of the original ELO board members had an explicit connection to academe. Rather, we had on the board two publishers (Mark Bernstein and Peter Bernstein), four Internet/media/technology executives (Jeff Ballowe, Gene DeRose, Larry Wangberg, and Anne Schott), and two non-profit executives (William Wadsworth and Celia O'Donnell). We also had a number of writers and e-writers on the board (Robert Coover, Marjorie Luesebrink, Cathy Marshall, Stuart Moulthrop, and Rob Swigart). While four of these five had academic affiliations, the primary focus of the group as it was composed in 2000 was not electronic literature as it would be studied, processed, and developed in academe,

but rather how it might be adopted within the culture more broadly. This year 2000 iteration of the board of directors was structured to serve a more executive-level function than the current board. The idea was that the board would raise money, make strategic decisions, and direct the activities of a staff that would manage the actual programs at the front-line level. Additionally, the Internet Industry Advisory Board included five C.E.O.s of Internet companies, who each made a significant donation to the seed funding of the ELO. The idea at the time was that this group would expand, continuing to help with fundraising and advice on how to interface the cultural activities of the ELO with the commercial activities of the contemporary Web. Finally, the Literary Advisory Board was a large group of print writers (including such luminaries as John Barth, T.C. Boyle, Harry Mathews, George Plimpton, and Heather McHugh), e-writers (such as Michael Joyce, Stephanie Strickland, Carolyn Guertin, Loss Pequeno Glazier, Bobby Arellano, Rob Wittig, and Rob Kendall), publishers (such the legendary founder of the Evergreen Review, Barney Rosset, and Grove Press's Morgan Entrekin, as well as e-lit journal publishers such as Edward Falco of the The New River), and critics and theorists (such as N. Katherine Hayles, Raine Koskimaa, Larry McCaffery, Thomas LeClair, and Joseph Tabbi). The Literary Advisory Board was intended to offer advice on activities such as awards competitions, readings, and publication activities, as well as expanding the reach of the ELO in literary communities.



The ELO's first membership brochure (2000).

In retrospect it is almost staggering that we were able to pull together so many influential people in so brief a period. The first board of directors was very productive

and energetic in the activity of bringing all these boards together: Coover, Ballowe, and everyone else on the board basically opened up their Rolodexes to the ELO, and it was surprising even to us how many people were enthusiastic about participating in the development of this new organization. These were the days of the irrational exuberance of the dot com boom, and this might sound strange to say, but for a while it seemed as if there was a general sense of acceleration in the air. Within the space of just one year, we had moved from just a few hand-scrawled notions in a notebook to an incorporated non-profit organization that involved about sixty different people, an office, a seed budget, staff in place, and programs underway.

Looking at the list of programs outlined in this brochure, several of them remain the core activities of the ELO today: the “web resource center,” the Electronic Literature Directory, e-lit readings and events, and symposia were all conceived at this time. There are a few programs, such as the “Connections Program” which was intended to bring e-lit to libraries, and to connect print writers with e-writers and designers, and the “International Day of Readings” which never saw the light of day. The “Electronic Literature Prizes” did materialize, in the form of the 2001 Electronic Literature Awards.

Successes and Failures 1999-2001

During the period that I was the executive director, the ELO saw a number of important milestones achieved. The first and most important was the foundation of the organization, its incorporation, and successful transition to established federal nonprofit status. We were also successful in publicizing electronic literature and the activities of the field quite well. We were aggressive in sending out press releases and developing media connections, and during this period a number of national newspapers, such as the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune*, magazines, radio and TV outlets published stories about the ELO and electronic literature more generally. In 2000, we organized fundraising events in New York (hosted by George Plimpton) and in Seattle.



Article about electronic literature in the Los Angeles Times, May 18, 2000, based on interviews conducted after the ELO fundraising event in Seattle.



Article about the ELO in the Chicago Tribune, May 18, 2001.



Bicycle boy zaps guests: Brown semiotics majors who wrote their theses on hypertext and slept with their professors rub their paws in anticipation! You certainly didn't hear it from us, but Paris Review editor George Plimpton is throwing up his hands about the whole books-are-obsolete mess and serving cheese to members of the Electronic Literature Organization, or E.L.O. (hey, wasn't that a psychedelic 70's band?) at his apartment. Mrs. Plimpton throws everybody out when some geek uses the word "metafiction."

[Top-secret Upper East Side location, 6 p.m., by invitation only; 274-0343 ext. 18, don't tell 'em we sent you!]

Unauthorized satirical notice of the ELO Fundraiser at the home of George Plimpton, editor of the Paris Review, published in The New York Observer the day of the party.

From 1999-2001 we conducted a number of e-lit readings and events, including GiG⁵ and GiG 2.0 in Chicago in 1999 and 2000, the Boston T1 Party at the Boston Cyberarts Festival in 2001, e-lit readings at New York University in 2001, contributed panels to the TextZeroOne electronic publishing conference in New York and the 2001 Chicago Humanities Festival, and an electronic literature show and exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in 2002. During 2001-2002 we organized the Interactions reading series at the University of Illinois at Chicago, funded by the Illinois Humanities Council, which paired electronic literature authors with critics who responded to the works presented. We developed the first iteration of the ELO directory, which was active for several years thereafter. We had the first (and unfortunately to date only) Electronic Literature Awards competition, which awarded two \$10,000 prizes in digital fiction and poetry in 2001, and culminated with an awards ceremony at the New School in New York. The website was also very active during this period: news about electronic literature was published on the

site on an ongoing basis, a monthly email newsletter was published to our membership, and online chats with featured e-lit writers⁶, conducted by Deena Larsen, took place on a regular basis. For a brief period, the organization was well funded. I was a full-time employee of the organization, and a number of other people were working with us on an hourly or contracted basis. Eric Rasmussen was employed as programs assistant, William Gillespie was developing the news content of the site, Kurt Heintz was contracted to do development. Robert Kendall and Nick Traenkner worked together to develop the bespoke database platform for the first version of the Electronic Literature Directory. Renowned Chicago designer Rick Valicenti developed an identity set for the ELO on a pro bono basis, and a number of paid interns worked with us during this period, including John Vincler, who is still working with the ELO's directory project today.

During this period I was thinking of the ELO both as a national organization and as one with a local home in Chicago. Though we were struggling with all the minutiae and logistical challenges of establishing a non-profit organization operating nationally with a distributed leadership, what kept me going on a day-to-day basis was the support of an active and engaged local community. In addition to the people working directly with the organization, friends like Rob Wittig, Joseph Tabbi, and Roderick Coover were very engaged with the activities of the ELO, and even as the organization was finding its identity, we were actively engaged in the creation of what you might call an "e-lit scene" in Chicago, fed by creative and intellectual exchanges about electronic literature and what it might become⁷. The two GiG events for me encapsulate the energy of this scene. The first GiG took place shortly after the foundation of the ELO in 1999, and was largely the brainchild of Roderick Coover, who thought we should bring e-lit together with some of the media art he and his colleagues were doing at the Art Institute of Chicago. We had only a shoestring budget. One of Roderick's friends lent us the use of his art gallery, basically a large empty loft space. Kurt Heintz pulled together a number of e-poets for telepresent videopoetry readings from New York and Washington. Musician Paul Kotheimer agreed to play a set and friend DJ Pancake agreed to spin some tunes. The day before the event, we showed up with some lumber and (thanks to Coover's carpentry skills) built a stage, painted a flat white to serve as a screen, jury-rigged a contraption to hang the projector from the ceiling, and put together some booths to show short films. We bought a keg of beer and a case of cheap wine, and friends agreed to tend the bar. We had plastered the Wicker Park neighborhood with posters, but were still surprised at the turnout. It was an impromptu festival, and it went into the wee hours of the morning. Among the things I learned from the two GiG events was that people were willing to volunteer their time, effort, and creativity to enable not just a cool party but also a creative convergence to take place. The other thing that I took away from the experience was that e-lit can be presented well with other art forms. At the first GiG we had hypertext and e-poetry but also a bit of Samuel Beckett, films, folk songs, and Brazilian dance music. The GiGs were a

celebration of e-lit but also a celebration of a cultural context in which it was taking place. I think that both the ethos of volunteerism and the awareness that e-lit exists within an interzone of other cultural practices has remained very important to the way that ELO has operated in the years since.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9th, 2000 • 8–11 PM

GiG 2.0

**An Interactive Cabaret of
Electronic Literature and Media**

 <p>The Unknown (An interactive reading from the hypertext novel.) Featuring: William Gillespie, Scott Rettberg, and Dirk Stratton http://www.unknownhypertext.com</p>	 <p>The Ed Report The Ed Report The Ed Report The Ed Report The Ed Report</p>	 <p>CHAOSity Interactive collaborative CD-ROM by Niki Nolan, Wade Roberts, Karen Lee Osborne and Maureen Seaton</p>
 <p>Michelle Citron Presenting the CD-ROM interactive video As American As Apple Pie http://www.rtf.nyu.edu/faculty/citron/</p>	 <p>Tyehimba Jess and Lisa Hemminger Live readings from Chicago poets http://www.e-poets.net</p>	 <p>The Ed Report Scandal revealed by Nick Montfort and William Gillespie http://www.edreport.com</p>
 <p>the world of poetry</p>	 <p>Bob Holman Live (link) from New York through the e-poets network. http://www.worldofpoetry.com</p>	 <p>Joe Tabbi Master of Ceremonies and editor of the Electronic Book Review http://altz.com/ebri/</p>
 <p>FRIDAY'S BIG MEETING</p>	 <p>Rob Wittig Director of Tank20 Literary Studios presents Friday's Big Meeting http://www.tank20.com</p>	 <p>Kurt Heintz Creative Director and publisher of the e-poets Network http://www.e-poets.net</p>
 <p>BeeHive</p>	 <p>Talan Memmott Presenting his energetic and creative webzine BeeHive http://beehive.temporalimage.com/index.html</p>	
 <p>elo</p>	<p>GiG 2.0 commemorates the first anniversary of the Electronic Literature Organization, a national 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Chicago with a mission to facilitate and promote the writing, reading, and publishing of literature designed for the electronic media.</p>	

Saturday, December 9, 2000 – Performance 8–11
Center Portion Gallery – 2850 W. Fullerton, Chicago
\$10 donation at the door, free libations
<http://www.eliterature.org/gig/>
Space is limited, please arrive on time to see the show.

Poster for 2000 GiG 2.0 event, poster design by Adam Richer.

The 2001 Awards constituted another major milestone for the ELO, in a number of ways. It was among the first ELO activities to draw in the participation of many different writers who may or may not have thought of themselves as members of the ELO community. With two \$10,000 awards on offer, it did not seem to matter a

great deal if one was allied to a particular faction of e-lit, hypertext, or e-poetry, or really if authors or designers had considered their work within that frame previously. Many of the people who submitted interesting work to the 2001 Awards had never for instance been associated with Eastgate or with the E-Poetry festival. I think the competition's very openness, with one prize simply designated for fiction and another for poetry, and the wide diversity of work submitted and selected for the shortlists in each category, helped to establish electronic literature as a broader category that could encompass a number of different types of literary practice that make use of digital media.

Electronic Literature Organization: homepage

Back Forward Stop Refresh Home Print Mail

http://www.ELITERATURE.ORG

Award Judges

welcome to the
Electronic Literature Organization

call for submissions

**The Electronic Literature Organization
Announces The First Annual
Electronic Literature
Awards**

**\$10,000 Prizes
For Fiction & Poetry**

www.eliterature.org/Awards2001/

**\$15.00 Reading Fee
Submissions Accepted
December 1, 2000 - February 15, 2001**

Judging Criteria:

- Innovative use of electronic techniques and enhancements.
- Literary quality, understood as being related to print and electronic traditions of fiction and poetry.
- Quality and accessibility of interface design.

Sponsored by ZDNet

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© The 2001 Electronic Literature Awards

Larry McCaffery,
author of *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Science Fiction*, and *After Yesterday's Crash: The Avant Pop Anthology*, will judge the Fiction competition.

Photo by Margenta Mitchell

Heather McHugh,
Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets and author of *Hinge & Sign* and *The Father of the Predicaments*, will judge the Poetry competition.

Flier advertising the 2001 Electronic Literature Awards. The poster, designed by Kurt Heintz, was sent to writing programs and art schools across the USA.

The selection process for the 2001 Awards was both peer-reviewed and judged. Members of the ELO Literary Advisory Board selected the works on the shortlists. Each of the 163 works submitted was reviewed by at least three people in the first round, and the six works with the highest aggregate scores were then passed on to the two final judges who chose the winners: Larry McCaffery for fiction and Heather McHugh for poetry. The choice of final judges was somewhat controversial at the time, in that neither McCaffery nor McHugh were deeply familiar with hypertext or e-poetry. McCaffery was a leading literary critic, particularly of postmodern American fiction, and McHugh a well-known experimental print poet. Selecting them as judges was an intentional attempt to reach outside of the existing e-lit subcultures to a wider literary culture, in keeping with a general emphasis on broadening the audience for e-lit.



Poster advertising the 2001 Electronic Literature Awards ceremony. Poster by Rick Valecenti's 3st studios.

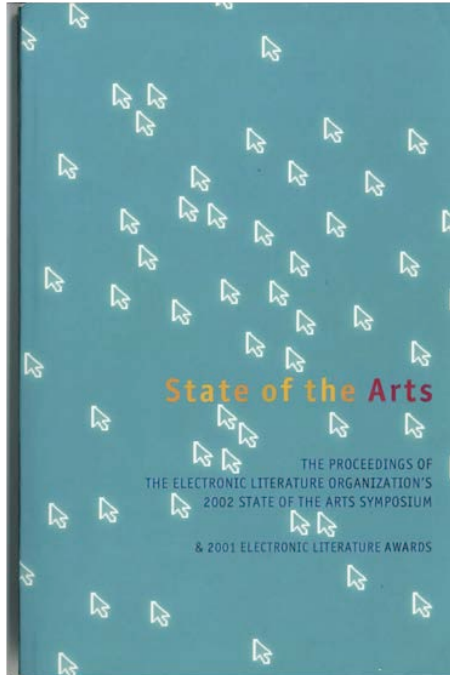
The range of work shortlisted for the awards was an eye-opener for me personally in terms of what I might consider “fiction” and “poetry” to be in the e-lit context. While the list for fiction included Shelley Jackson’s excellent Storyspace hypertext retelling of the Frankenstein myth, *Patchwork Girl*, it also included a number of works that took radically different approaches to the form and interface of fiction, ranging from Talan Memmott’s Deleuzian meditation on cyborgorganized consciousness, [Lexia to Perplexia](#), to Mez’s the [data\[h\]!bleeding](#) texts written in her particularly styled mutation of human and machine language, to Noah Wardrip-Fruin et al.’s [The Impermanence Agent](#), which is both a tale of human loss and a degenerative web browser, to Paul Chan’s [Alturnumerics](#), a set of fonts in which each keystroke provides not a letter but a word, phrase, or iconic image, with each font tied to a particular concept or thinker. In every case the materiality of the interface and the particularities of the digital medium played at least as significant a role as did any traditional idea of story. The prizewinner, Caitlin Fisher’s [These Waves of Girls](#), like *Patchwork Girl*, was both recognizably a story and suited to particular vernacular qualities of the medium. Likewise, John Cayley’s [windsound](#) – the poetry winner – was both explicitly procedural and distinctively expressive at the level of language. In every case in both categories for the 2001 Awards however we saw works that were ontologically distinct from print literature, representatives of what was becoming a form between the recognizably literary, the visual, the conceptual, and the procedural. I have attached some archival materials from the 2001 Awards, including a photocopy of the [printed program](#) and a set of photographs from the [ceremony](#).

With a number of people staffing the organization and a fast-paced stream of activities taking place, of course, funding was an ongoing and pressing concern. We had a number of successes in this area, first with the seed funding for the organization, mainly from individuals working in the technology industry, and then with foundations. During this period we received funding from the Ford Foundation, which funded the first Electronic Literature Symposium at UCLA in 2002, and the Rockefeller Foundation, which funded work on the Electronic Literature Directory. In spite of these successes, funding was ultimately the most significant challenge for the organization in its earliest period. When the Internet bubble burst in 2000-2001, many of the individuals who had been very generous with the ELO at the time of its foundation suddenly found their net worth and disposable income considerably diminished. Although the costs of running the ELO were not particularly extravagant, without continuing funding from the initial individual donors, by mid-2001, it did not seem sustainable to the board to continue to plan on funding even one full-time position, and we began to look for other models of how the ELO might be constituted.

The arrangement with UCLA both offered the ELO a lifeline that enabled us to sustain the organization through the economic downturn, and I think most importantly nested the organization within an academic context. Particularly with N. Katherine Hayles serving in the role of a faculty adviser and champion, the organization made new inroads within the contexts of literary studies and media arts. We were also lucky to find a skilled managing director in the person of Jessica Pressman, who managed the affairs of the ELO at UCLA for several years before completing her Ph.D. and eventually joining the faculty of Yale University, where she teaches electronic literature in the English department today. Pressman was succeeded in her position at UCLA by Carol Wald, who also served the ELO well during her stint as managing director.

The 2002 State of the Arts Symposium, funded by the Ford Foundation, was the first and most significant event that took place at UCLA. The generous funding enabled the ELO to invite and cover the basic travel costs of a number of expert panels. Looking back at the topics of the panels for the 2002 symposium, I think they are still matters of concern to the field today: "Writers Looking Ahead", "Navigating the Borders – Edges and Interfaces", "Graduate Programs", "Accessibility and Diversity", "Multimedia Criticism", "Electronic Literature in the University", "Technique: Tools for Cross-Fertilization and Interactivity", "Publishing Models for Electronic Literature", and "Archiving Digital Culture." The three keynote addresses also represented three significant voices representative of paradigms of viewing literature's transition to digital media: Hayles, who was and remains one of the most significant theorists working on e-lit, Robert Coover, who has guided dozens of talented writers to experiments in writing for digital media, and Jason Epstein, the former editor of the *New York Review of Books* who was an early advocate of transitioning the publishing industry to electronic publishing models. The conference also included a juried exhibition of works of e-lit, which was an important precedent for the ELO conferences that have followed.

The proceedings of the conference, including "scribe reports" summarizing each of the panel discussions, the keynotes, and selected individual contributions, were published in 2003 in State of the Arts, along with a CD-ROM including most of the works shortlisted for the awards as well as audio from the symposium. This book and CD is still available for order from the ELO. A .zip file of the CD-ROM contents is also available for download on the ELMCIP Knowledge Base. This was the ELO's first formal publication, and began an important strand of the organization's activities.



Cover of *State of the Arts* (2003), the ELO's first publication.

The board of directors was undergoing some important shifts during this period, as more theorists, critics, and authors, such as Alan Liu, Bill Seaman, Stephanie Strickland, Thom Swiss, Matthew Kirschenbaum, and Nick Montfort joined the board of directors while a number of the members of the initial board cycled off. While many of the initial board members were missed, the changes were also in keeping with two general shifts within the organization: one notable turn is towards ELO's development as an academic organization. While in its first iteration the ELO may have been envisioned more as an organization focused on writers and on popularizing e-lit, it was increasingly becoming an actor in shaping an academic field of practice: moving from something more like the Academy of American Poets to something more like the MLA, or perhaps on a more appropriate scale, the Association of Internet Researchers or Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts. This is not to say that ELO was abandoning a focus on bringing electronic literature to audiences and helping e-lit writers to build a community, just that the channels for doing that were increasingly embedded with an academic context. We were in the process of becoming an arts organization that was also a professional academic consortium. The loss of some original board members enabled the ELO to reconsider its mission and focus. When Eastgate Systems' Mark Bernstein

resigned from the board of the ELO in 2003, the ELO was liberated from a voice that had consistently argued against the ELO considering publishing of works of e-lit to be an aspect of its mission. Indeed, the publication of the first volume of the Electronic Literature Collection would likely have never taken place had Bernstein remained on the ELO board.

The other thing that the leadership of the ELO realized during these years was that without significant financial resources, we could not conceive of the board of directors as having a purely administrative or fundraising role – that is to say that without money for staff salaries, the members of the board would need to be much more active in the execution of the programs they conceived. To some degree the ELO has operated in this way ever since: as a lean organization with a small budget, driven by the voluntary work of people who care about building their own field of creative and scholarly practice. While more can always be accomplished more quickly with better funding, the ELO has been a prime example of what can be accomplished by an organized group of dedicated people with common goals, even with very few resources.

Locally at UCLA, the ELO conducted a series of events and readings with the Hammer Museum from 2003-2005, and from 2004-2006, Nick Montfort organized an ELO reading series, MACHINE, at the Kelly Writer's House at the University of Pennsylvania. The ELO also sponsored panels, readings, and events at a number of conferences and festivals, such as the ACH, SLSA, and Boston Cyberarts Festival. These sorts of arrangements, series of events in which the ELO serves as a partner with another local cultural institution in arranging and promoting live readings and performances of works of electronic literature, have remained a successful model for the organization into the present day⁸. The ongoing Purple Blurb series at MIT and 2011 presentations of the Electronic Literature Collection Volume 2 at the Bergen Public Library in Bergen, Norway and at The Kitchen in New York are recent examples of this continuing tradition.

The Preserving, Archiving, and Dissemination project was a focus of the organization during the UCLA years. The project resulted in the publication of two very important white papers, "[Acid-Free Bits: Recommendations for Long-Lasting Electronic Literature](#)" by Nick Montfort and Noah Wardrip-Fruin and "[Born-Again Bits: A Framework for Migrating Electronic Literature](#)" by Alan Liu, David Durand, Nick Montfort, Merrilee Proffitt, Liam R. E. Quin, Jean-Hugues Réty, and Noah Wardrip-Fruin. In April 2003, with the Digital Cultures Project, the ELO also co-sponsored the [e\(X\)literature: The Preservation, Archiving, and Dissemination of Electronic Literature conference](#), organized by Alan Liu at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Although a significant grant to produce and distribute tools to make it easier for writers to produce more sustainable e-lit and to emulate and otherwise preserve endangered works of electronic literature was never successfully attained by the ELO, the PAD project did have a number of significant positive outcomes. The

two white papers are frequently cited in discussions of digital preservation⁹, and the project resulted in an ongoing dialogue between the electronic literature community and librarians and digital archivists. Indeed, Rui Torres, since 2011 the leader of the EU-funded Po.EX Archive, an excellent project working on the preservation of Portuguese experimental literature, recently cited “Born-Again Bits” as the inspiration for some of the electronic literature preservation and emulation aspects of his project. The preservation of digital materials in general and electronic literature in particular is a long game, and will remain a concern for actors in the field for decades to come.

In 2004, while Nick Montfort and Talan Memmott were visiting me at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey (in fact after an evening of watching Talan clean up on an Atlantic City casino craps table), we discussed a common frustration we shared with many other e-lit authors and teachers of electronic literature: that while there was clearly a respectable corpus of innovative works of electronic literature, there were still relatively few publication venues. I was teaching electronic literature in a new media studies program there, and every semester I would face the same challenge: that many of the works I had taught the previous year would either be technically obsolescent or would have simply disappeared in the interim. Nick suggested that one way to help address the concerns both of creating a new publishing venue for authors and making more work more easily available for academic study would be for the ELO to get more actively involved in publishing electronic literature. We were all in agreement that while the ELO focus on archiving and preserving the past of electronic literature was important, one of the best ways that preservation could be accomplished was by collecting and publishing works of electronic literature, and keeping them freely accessible on the ELO server and elsewhere. In October 2004 Nick and I hammered out the first draft of the proposal for the ELC (Electronic Literature Collection), which I have attached.

As with all ELO projects, the nature of the ELC changed from its initial conception to its execution. While we initially proposed an annual publication, which might be tied to a renewed awards program, in actual execution the first two volumes of the ELC, published in 2006 and 2011, have each taken a longer time to produce. Not incidentally, each of the two volumes are more substantial than we initially conceptualized, with each containing about sixty works of e-lit and a well developed editorial apparatus supporting them. A few notable elements of this proposal have however remained consistent:

1. a commitment to publishing the ELC with a permissive Creative Commons licensed basis, making it easy for people to copy and share the Collection and works it contains,

2. a commitment to publish the ELC both on the ELO web server and on other media suitable for other forms of distribution and archiving (such as installation on machines at schools and inclusion in library collections),
3. an editorial structure based on a rotating collective model, in which each iteration of the ELC will be edited by a different small group, who would take responsibility both for selecting works from submissions and for producing the ELC, and
4. an interest in communicating and work with librarians to make the collection available to the public in library contexts.

2006-2010 Setting Clear Priorities and Developing Infrastructure for the Field

During the period of Marjorie Luesebrink's presidency, the ELO had transitioned from an exciting and active but tenuous start-up nonprofit organization to a stable and established entity rooted in academe. In 2005, Thom Swiss, who was located at the University of Iowa at the time, took on the role of President of the ELO, with Nick Montfort and Noah Wardrip-Fruin serving as vice-presidents during his term. An important meeting of the ELO executive committee took place at the University of Iowa in 2005. One of the matters discussed there was the revision and approval of a working definition of electronic literature drafted a committee led by Noah Wardrip-Fruin, which specifies that "the term refers to works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer" and provides a number of examples of types of works within the broad category. While this definition has proven somewhat controversial (as "important literary aspects" tends towards the tautological) it was very useful for the ELO as an organization to delimit the type of work on which it would focus. The other important outcome of the meeting in Iowa was also one of delimitation. In Iowa we agreed that for the time being the organization would focus primarily on four main areas of activity: reviving the Electronic Literature Directory, which at that point was no longer operating as originally intended[10], streamlining and bringing more regular activity to the ELO website, publishing the Electronic Literature Collection, and organizing conferences and events related to electronic literature for writers and academics working in the field. These have remained the main priorities of the organization ever since.

In 2006, as N. Katherine Hayles was moving from her position at UCLA to a new position at Duke University, the ELO also migrated from UCLA to the Maryland Institute of Technology in the Humanities (MITH), a dynamic digital humanities

research center at the University of Maryland. Matthew Kirschenbaum and Neil Fraistat at MITH guided this transition, and secured vital resources including a half-time managing director position, office space, and technical support for the ELO. This year also saw the publication of the Electronic Literature Collection, Volume 1, edited by N. Katherine Hayles, Nick Monfort, me, and Stephanie Strickland¹⁰. The ELC was funded by a number of partners, mostly individual academic departments¹¹, who each donated \$500-\$1000 to support the publication. Although the release of the ELC 1 was not without problems – we later discovered that the company we hired to produce them did not replicate a substantial proportion of the CD-ROMs properly – on the whole the Electronic Literature Collection was even more successful than anticipated. The ELC made sixty works of electronic literature in a wide variety of formats and aesthetic approaches available at one URL as well as on CD-ROM. The Collection was reviewed widely in online and print publications and perhaps even more importantly, was almost instantly adopted on the syllabi of many educators teaching electronic literature in the USA and abroad. I don't think I realized the impact of the publication of the ELC until a year later, after I had moved to Norway and was attending the "Remediating Literature" conference in Utrecht. Nearly all of the papers I heard at that conference, particularly those produced by younger scholars, referenced works that were included in the ELC. Some even referred to the ELC as the "electronic literature canon." While I don't share this view of the ELC as a canon, but rather think of the ELC as sort of periodic snapshot of an emergent field in motion, I do think it is remarkable that only one year after its publication, some scholars were already thinking of it in that way.

In May 2007, the ELO resumed its agenda of independently organized conferences and events with a symposium "The Future of Electronic Literature" at MITH organized by Matthew Kirschenbaum and our new managing director at MITH, helen DeVinney. The seminar, centered on issues of the archiving, publishing, and internationalization of electronic literature, encapsulated many of the themes with which the ELO remains intimately involved.

In 2007, Joseph Tabbi began his term as President of the ELO. Chief among the accomplishments of his tenure was the revitalization and re-launch of the Electronic Literature Directory. The new directory, which launched in 2009, has different conceptual focus and scope than the directory that preceded it. Rather than attempting to pigeonhole works into somewhat arbitrary categories derived from the print tradition and technical formats (for example "Long Hypertext Fiction" or "Short Kinetic Poetry") the new directory is based on a folksonomical model of tagging, so that works can be found and accessed via multiple conceptual, technical, and thematic criteria, which can be adjusted over time as the discourse of the field changes¹². Even more importantly, the new directory is fundamentally focused on carefully composed short descriptions of work, each of which are intended to serve as fixed starting points for critical discourse. Tabbi assembled an

editorial working group of writers and scholars who engage in a peer-to-peer discussion and critique of entries-in-progress. While the ELD is open to contributions from all interested writers and scholars, this core community of contributors and editors, first led by Lori Emerson and currently by Davin Heckman, are central to the process of developing carefully vetted critical entries in which the ELD editors are engaged¹³. In concert with other international electronic literature database efforts, such as the ELMCIP Electronic Literature Knowledge Base we are currently developing at the University of Bergen, and the NT2 database of French-language electronic literature and digital arts, the ELD is making a vital contribution to developing a research infrastructure for electronic literature.

In 2007 we also saw the development of a relationship between the ELO and the United States Library of Congress Archive-It project. For several years, the ELO has provided the LOC with an annotated list of URLs, which are then systematically archived by the Internet Archive and made available as a discrete searchable archive accessible via the Library of Congress. While Internet Archive technology remains imperfect at archiving non-standardized and proprietary web formats, such as Flash, that have been commonly utilized in works of electronic literature, at the very least we can be assured that a good representation of the contemporary field of electronic literature will be well documented within the Internet Archive and available for future use.

After joining the ELO board, Dene Grigar established a clear priority to revitalize ELO's conferencing activity beyond relatively small symposia to a fully-fledged congress on the scale of other major academic conferences and festivals and in 2008 organized and hosted the Visionary Landscapes conference at Washington State University. The conference included more than 150 writers, artists, scholars and other presenters. Grigar strived to achieve a balance between readings and performances of e-lit, paper presentations, and panel discussions. The conference was also notable for the fact that media artworks were presented and exhibited alongside clearly literary works: it was a conference of electronic literature and its boundary disciplines, with an awareness that border zones are often the areas where the most interesting activity takes place. The conference was a success and offered the ELO a model of how continue to develop a large-scale biennial congress of the field.

This success was repeated in 2010 at Brown University, with the ELO AI (Archive & Innovate) conference at Brown University organized by John Cayley and the Brown Literary Arts Program. The Brown University event was a homecoming of sorts for the ELO, as a decade after its inception, the organization returned to the campus where it had first been conceived. I took a great deal of pride in the fact that more than a decade after Jeff Ballowe, Robert Coover, and I had spent a few moments at a table together musing over the notion of what an electronic literature organization

might be, the ELO was not only still alive but thriving in its work, central to a vibrant field of creative and academic practice.

2011 and Beyond: Continuity, Challenges, and Opportunities

In 2011, Electronic Literature Collection, Volume Two edited by Laura Borràs Castanyer, Talan Memmott, Rita Raley, and Brian Kim Stefans, was published online¹⁴. Initial reviews of the ELC2 have been positive, and every indication is that this ELC, of similar scope and scale, will have as significant an impact as the first in terms of helping to supplement electronic literature curricula, expose new people to the field, and to help expand and enrich our understanding of what forms digital literary practice will take in the future. Work on the Electronic Literature Directory has also proceeded apace. The Consortium for Electronic Literature (CELL), an affiliate network of electronic literature organizations, projects, and institutions, has also begun to take shape. Through the CELL, entities such as the ELO, NT2 in Canada, ELMCIP, Laboratoire Paragraphe, Hermeneia, the Po.Ex Archive of Experimental Portuguese Literature, the Australian Creative Nation project, MIT, the Brown University Digital Literary Arts Archive, litnet Siegen, and others are beginning to work together on electronic literature projects such as sharing information between online databases, bibliographic and archiving standards for electronic literature, coordinating the timing and publicity of events and so forth, on an international basis. Planning is well underway for the next ELO conference, "Electrifying Literature" which will take place June 20-23, 2012 at West Virginia University, and which promises to be a major event on the scale of the Washington State and Brown University events. Nick Montfort has taken the reins as the President of the ELO, and in the fall of 2011 the organization moved headquarters from Maryland to the Cambridge, Massachusetts campus of MIT, where we hope that many new opportunities might avail themselves.

The ELO is now stable in a number of ways. For the near term at least, it is focused on producing four programs: the website and related communications (such as a Facebook group and active Twitter feed maintained by Communications Director Mark C. Marino) which share news and information relevant to the field, the production and maintenance of the Electronic Literature Directory, the periodic publication and distribution of the *Electronic Literature Collection*, and the organization of a major biennial conference. Though not precisely a structured program, a fifth strand of activity that has remained consistent is the co-organization of readings and seminars with other partners, typically organized and championed by an individual ELO member or board member. Yet behind the scenes,

ELO still struggles with challenges common to many nonprofit organizations. Since the move to UCLA, ELO has always to some extent been dependent on the generosity of an academic host to fund a managing director position and office. The organization has struggled to build and maintain a membership that not only participates in its program but that is willing to make financial contributions to keep the lights on. There is significant overhead involved just in the procedural mechanics of keeping a non-profit organization running, particularly one with a fairly involved technical infrastructure. While the ELO has had some successes with grants, it is difficult for an essentially all-volunteer organization to compete with the apparatus assembled by major research universities who are competing for the same Digital Humanities funding. I'm often frustrated by how long it takes for ELO projects to move from concept to fruition. In the first few years of the organization's history, when we did have more significant funding and were able to pay for staff, our programs moved at a different pace. The best thing that could happen to the ELO would be the development of a significant endowment, which could fund at least one full-time position, freeing the organization to focus more on its programs and less on the mechanics of securing basic operating funding. Failing that however I'm proud of the fact that even during periods when the ELO has been operating with the most minimalist of budgets, its programs have always moved forward. In twelve years, it has never gone into hibernation.

While all of the individual programs and events I have mentioned here have contributed in some way to shaping the field of electronic literature as it is currently practiced, I think the most important factor in the ELO's contribution to the field of electronic literature is ultimately not any of the programs at all, but rather the very fact of the community which has developed and participated in them. Over the years, I have spoken with a number of teachers who have told me the story of how they convinced skeptical colleagues and curriculum committees that teaching literature or writing based in digital media could be worthwhile. The fact that they could go to a website that explained what electronic literature is, that provided examples they could teach, that demonstrated that other scholars and writers across the USA and around the world were writing and doing research in the topic, provided them with much-needed evidence that electronic literature was legitimate, vital, and worthy of intellectual engagement. This is important because, particularly in the early years, many electronic literature writers and scholars are fairly isolated within traditional academic structures. I have also heard from leaders of other international organizations and projects, such as Quebec-based NT2, that the ELO served as an inspiration and model as they put together the plans that led to the development of their projects. The ELO has most fundamentally provided a meeting place (albeit a decentered one) for a field to gather, for a self-sustaining creative community to develop and thrive.

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Montfort, Nick, and Scott Rettberg. "Proposal for a ELO Project: ELC (Electronic Literature Collection)." Oct. 2004.

Notes

1. Along with Geniwate's digital poem "[Rice](#)."
2. See Jill Walker Rettberg's paper "Electronic Literature Seen from a Distance: The Beginnings of a Field" in this Dichtung Digital issue for her discussion of electronic literature publishing venues during this period.
3. To be clear, while the Electronic Literature Organization can claim some responsibility (or blame) for popularizing the term, we did not invent it. The earliest use of the term to describe what we now think of as e-lit, at least according to Jill Walker Rettberg's research cited in her article in [this issue](#), is in a 1985 essay by Jay David Bolter: "The Idea of Literature in the Electronic Medium." Computers in the Liberal Arts. Topic, 39. Washington, PA: Washington and Jefferson College. pp 23-34.
4. We changed the name from "Electronic Literature Foundation" to "Electronic Literature Organization" when we at some point realized that rhetorically "Foundation" suggests an entity that already has funding to hand out while "Organization" does not. Organizations often apply for grants, while foundations often award them. For all of the jokes we have endured over the ELO acronym over the years – which the organization of course shares with the 70s band the Electric Light Orchestra, you can imagine all the whimsical Tolkeinesque puns that ELF would have engendered.

5. GiG is not an abbreviation. The idea was that the event would feature about a gigabyte of electronic literature and digital art.
6. Archives of the chats led by Deena Larsen are available on the [ELQ](#) site.
7. In his article "Shyness, Cushions, and Food Case Studies in American Creative Communities" in this Dichtung Digital issue, Rob Wittig describes the "e-lit dinners" that he, Joseph Tabbi, Kurt Heinz, and I and a rotating cast of writers met for on a regular basis during this period at Chicago restaurant Moti Mahal.
8. Most of these readings and events (and many others) are documented in the ELMCIP [Knowledge Base](#).
9. See Hartling/Suter special issue of SPIEL on "Archiving Electronic Literature and Poetry: Problems, Tendencies, Perspectives" (2010) for a number of discussions of archiving and preservation issues specific to electronic literature.
10. For a more extensive discussion of the process of editing the ELC, see my SPIEL essay "Editorial Process and the Idea of Genre in Electronic Literature in the Electronic Literature Collection, Volume 1".
11. The sponsors of the Electronic Literature Collection, Volume 1: Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing at the University of Pennsylvania, Division of Arts and Humanities at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, ELINOR: Electronic Literature in the Nordic Countries, MITH: Maryland Institute of Technology in the Humanities at the University of Maryland, The School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota, and the College of Letters and Science English Department, University of California, Los Angeles.
12. See Joseph Tabbi's "Toward a Semantic Literary Web: Setting a Direction for the Electronic Literature Organization's Directory", and Patricia Tomaszek's "Reading, Describing, and Evaluating Electronic Literature" in SPIEL.
13. It should also be noted that undergraduate and graduate students are contributing to the development of both the Electronic Literature Directory and the ELMCIP Knowledge Base in collaboration with faculty at a number of institutions as part of their regular coursework. This sort of research-led teaching, in which students are engaged as co-researchers, will be important to the future success and sustainability of both projects.
14. A DVD version will also be published in 2012.