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E-voing muses The next wave in world literature is gestating in a scruffy Ravenswood office

[North Sports Final , C Edition]

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When it comes to literature, the future is running late.

Scott Rettberg, though, is doing his best to hurry it up. He's like the dad waiting in the mini-van while the kids dawdle in their bedrooms: He slaps the horn, hollers "Come on, guys!" and guns the engine for dramatic effect.

"There are still some pockets of resistance to accepting anything electronic as a viable art form," Rettberg said in an e-mail, "but their plaints are sounding ever more like the croaking of dinosaurs that will serve as background music for any period of change."

Rettberg is executive director of the Electronic Literature Organization (www.eliterature.org), a non-profit group based in Chicago that was formed about a year and a half ago to promote the literary use of hypertext, in other words computer-based creative work that offers links from one site to another within the text. The organization is funded by grants and seed money from Web-based companies.

On Friday, the ELO will take a giant step toward legitimacy with average Americans by doing something always guaranteed to attract their attention: giving away money. The ELO will announce the winners of its first literary awards at a ceremony in New York. A fiction writer and poet each will take home \$10,000 for work designed for the Internet and other electronic media.

For Rettberg, the event will mark the end of the busiest period of his life -- and the beginning, he hopes, of an even busier one, as the ELO increases the number and scope of its activities, especially in Chicago.

"Just running a non-profit -- all the filings, event planning, fund raising and such -- is a lot more time-consuming than I knew," said the genial Rettberg, 30, on a recent afternoon. Dressed in khaki pants and a T-shirt, taking meditative sips from a coffee mug, he talked about his new life. "I was here until 10 last night, doing budgets and all sorts of business types of things. I've gone from the crazy-writer-grad-student guy to a non-profit executive."

But he is willing to go to any extreme -- including, if absolutely necessary, donning a suit and tie -- if it means bringing attention to electronic literature. At present, Rettberg said, many people consider the term an oxymoron; to them, literature can only refer to a traditional paper-and-ink product with a linear narrative. Writing aimed specifically for the computer, writing that takes advantage of the computer's ability to allow readers to skip about at will, is a novelty and a curiosity but certainly not literature.

And yet, Rettberg pointed out, the existence of the ELO seems to demonstrate that electronic literature is on a roll. "There's less resistance now to the idea. A few years ago, some writers said, 'It's the destruction of the book.' They aren't saying that now. There will always be a place for the paper book, with its familiar reflective surface, its tangible tactility and its comforting ability to bring a sense of closure to chaotic experience."

Rettberg sat in the ELO's scruffy office on the third floor of a venerable building at 4401 N. Ravenswood Ave. The building itself is a nifty symbol of the transition from the old to the new. The first floor houses a company that makes precision gears for industry; the second floor is rented to various artists, including an animator and violin maker; and the third floor is home to an organization that traffics in the most ethereal and intangible product of all: electronic literature.

The higher you go at 4401 N. Ravenswood Ave., the deeper you bore into the center of what may be the greatest revolution in literary history since Gutenberg first hit the "start" button: hypertext.

Rettberg, an Elk Grove Village native, wants to keep that revolution close to home. "It was up in the air for a while whether we'd stay here or move to New York. I was really pulling for here."

In theory, of course, the ELO could be based anywhere. As is the case with any Internet-based organization, its true address is its Web site, not its ZIP code.

But Rettberg wants the world to know that Chicago hums with some of the world's most innovative electronic artists and most supportive institutions of electronic art, including, he said, the School of the Art Institute, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Columbia College Chicago, Northwestern University, the Electronic Book Review and the e-poets network.

"Chicago, a community often prone to insecurity complexes when it comes to the business of technology, ought to recognize its strengths in the cultural adoption of technology," Rettberg said.

Electronic literature often is confused with e-books. Much has been written lately about devices with names such as Rocket eBook, SoftBook and the Glassbook, which enable readers to download particular texts and read them in a handy, portable format.

New form of literature

Electronic literature, by contrast, is a new kind of literature itself, and can be accessed through a CD-ROM, the Internet or an e- book; the form of retrieval is irrelevant. What matters is the way electronic literature subverts the traditional narrative form -- sentences, paragraphs and chapters -- and gives readers an array of links, activated by a mouse-click on a highlighted word or image. With electronic literature, the reader is in the driver's seat. There is less of a fixed path down which the reader is forced to go, by virtue of a stately, measured text; said reader is encouraged to dart hither and yon, clicking here and there, exploring nooks and crannies activated by hyperlinks.

Nor is electronic literature the same as the multimedia presentations available on many Web sites, the bells and whistles that can include music, speech or more information about a topic. Electronic literature may offer those things, but its essence is the crafting of words and the inculcation of emotions by means of technology; it is a writer's vision, delivered through manifold channels rather than a familiar sequential format.

Rettberg, who is finishing his dissertation at the University of Cincinnati on electronic literature, collaborated on a hypertext novel about hypertext novels titled "The Unknown" (www.unknownhypertext.com).

How does it work?

Here's how electronic literature can work: An initial passage in "The Unknown" reads: "Hypertext, to put it clearly, is a mapping of a text onto a four-dimensional space. Normal grammars, then, do not apply, and become branching structures anew. Fragments, branches, links. The word is glowing and on a screen. . . . The text coils in on itself, it is a topographic map of the air currents in the upper atmosphere: those sudden winds that change direction inexplicably. The reader becomes a sort of satellite taking photographs of a huge and varied terrain. The reader can see the whole world or zoom in to see a particular ant on the banks of the Seine."

Several words in the passage -- such as "space" in the first sentence -- are underlined on the computer screen, indicating a hyperlink. If the reader clicks on "space," the screen switches to this story: "In space they took Dirk away and they made him write things. Lots of things. He was fed through an umbilical and in a glass sphere he wrote for days without stopping and the aliens observed him."

The word "umbilical," among others, is underlined; if the reader clicks on it, up pops a series of ultrasound photographs. The reader can continue with the new story, or return to the initial one. Reading a hypertext novel can be bewildering, but also exhilarating.

Few if any famous authors have yet attempted to create electronic literature. Stephen King recently released a novel exclusively on the Internet, requesting that readers send him a fee for each chapter they downloaded, but the novel itself was traditional in form. Electronic literature is not simply a new way of doing business; it is a new way of writing and reading.

Feeling the potential

Yet while they may not yet practice it themselves, some well-known literary figures have sensed the potential in electronic literature. The ELO's advisory board includes George Plimpton, Kurt Andersen, T.C. Boyle and John Barth.

"I still hear people say, 'I can't read off a screen.' But we do," Rettberg said. "We just read differently off a screen. I don't see a conflict between reading a paper book and reading this."

Rettberg contributes to "The Unknown," but these days most of his time is spent figuring out ways to promote electronic literature. That figuring takes place in the ELO office, which Rettberg shares with his assistant, Eric Rasmussen, who edits the organization's Web site.

The office is decorated in what might be called Early Bohemian: lopsided curtain, mismatched furniture, snapshots of friends taped to the wall alongside a John Lennon poster and what looks to be a permanent path worn in the thin gray carpet between Rettberg's desk and the ancient coffeepot.

Rasmussen, a graduate student at the University of Illinois at Chicago who also serves as book review editor of the Electronic Book Review (www.altx.com/ebr), believes hypertext actually is a lifeline for literature.

"If English and literature programs don't warm to e-literature and hypertext writing, I fear that language and writing could easily take a backseat to flashier, more cinematic features in new media productions," he said.

Still in its infancy

Yet electronic literature, Rasmussen conceded, is still in its creative infancy, and its practitioners -- especially novelists -- still are trying out figure out how to make it sing. "I'm not yet convinced that this genre [the novel] has been successfully translated to an electronic environment," he said. "I believe that, in general, the best e-lit currently being written is poetry rather than fiction. I suspect that this is largely due to the simple fact that poems are generally shorter than fiction, and the writers who are busy mastering multimedia languages and tools don't have the time to devote to a long work of narrative fiction."

Electronic literature is, though, a "bona fide cultural phenomenon," Rasmussen said. "It's clear that e-lit is quickly moving beyond a small grass-roots movement." Rettberg concurred. "Hypertext is less marginalized than it was not so long ago. The ELO and other organizations are devoted to expanding its audience, and the community of writers producing it all over the world are working with each other well.

"Much of the literary establishment recognizes that electronic literature poses not a threat, but an opportunity for literary culture to expand its audience and range."

[Illustration]

PHOTOS 2: Caption: PHOTO: There's not a book in sight in the Chicago office of Scott Rettberg, of the Electronic Literature Organization, which nurtures creative writing on the Internet. Photo for the Tribune by Peter Thompson. PHOTO: Kim White's electronic poem "The Minotaur Project" begins with an interactive list of four cantos (top). Clicking on a box leads to the verses, with animated bits of text and body images. The poem is one of six up for an Electronic Literature Award.

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