Contextualizing "Works on Desktop"
by Dene Grigar

Since 1991—beginning with Michael Joyce's hypertext novel, *afternoon: a story*, and academic books like Jay David Bolter's *Writing Space* (1991) and George Landow's *Hypertext* (1992) that discussed the shift to computer-based writing and the theories that helped to explain this phenomenon—I have been fascinated with literature created with and for computers. That it reminded me, at the time, of the experimentation Gertrude Stein, HD, Ezra Pound—and "the other Joyce" (as I referred to James in those days)—undertook with their art constituted one aspect of the compulsion to understand this art form, to make sense of it. Another compelling quality was that theorists were claiming that it heralded a major shift away from the print medium upon which we had long based our worldview—a paradigmatic shift not unlike the one reflected in Plato's *Phaedrus*. For a student of modernist poetry and ancient Greek literature, this was heady stuff too exciting to ignore. As this exhibit shows, I didn't. For the last 20 years I have tracked the growth and changes in the electronic medium, including the art produced for it, and can report that there is a large body of works to read and experience. This exhibit constitutes just a handful of them. But they represent some of the most exciting examples of *born digital* literature. The nine computer stations that comprise "Works on Desktop" include some of the earliest works of Electronic Literature and certainly a diverse sampling of what is available to experience and enjoy.

The 160 works included in this area of the exhibit have been organized into groups, such as "The Eastgate School" or "Multimodal Poetry," as a way of contextualizing them for a wide audience of scholars both new to this kind of literary art as well as well familiar with it. I have purposely avoided a more traditional organizational strategy of categorizing by the genres normally associated with Electronic Literature (e.g. hypertext fiction, interactive fiction) since these terms can vary from author to author and may confuse those new to digital technology (e.g. flash fiction, not as micro-fiction, but a story created with Adobe Flash software). In all but a couple of cases, the works exhibited here have been juried/peer-reviewed and have been 1) published by well-respected publishing houses, journals, and collections; 2) exhibited at gallery and/or media art shows; or 3) recognized in competitions.

Visitors entering the exhibit will notice that Computer Stations 1 & 2 contain the *Electronic Literature Collection ELC 1* and *ELC 2*, respectively. These are large-scale anthologies made available by the Electronic Literature Organization for access via the web and compact disk. Volume 1, published in 2006 and edited by N. Katherine Hayles, Nick Montfort, Scott Rettberg, and Stephanie Strickland, includes 60 works by 58 artists. Volume 2, published five years later in 2011, was edited by Laura Borras, Talan Memmott, Rita Raley, and Brian Kim Stefans. It consists of 61 works by 74 artists. I have situated these two anthologies early in the exhibit because their range and depth provide a good starting point for

gaining an understanding of Electronic Literature.

Computer Station 3: "The Eastgate School" offers some of the earliest examples of Electronic Literature produced in the U.S. (circa 1987-1995), including Joyce's *afternoon: a story,* Deena Larsen's *Marble Springs*, Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden*, Judy Malloy's *its name was Penelope*, and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*. Because they utilize a hypertext authoring software program called Storyspace that allows for textual linking before the web made this feature common, they and other works like them have been identified as the "Storyspace school" (Hayles 6). Today due to the fact that they are accessible on CD and will, like Malloy's work, be re-released as iPad apps, their mode of production is not as obvious as their site of publication, I refer to them, instead, as The Eastgate School.

Computer Station 4: "Experiments with Form" offers five works that play with the way interface design, coding, software capabilities, and medium provide a new means of expression and impact perception and understanding. Here we find Jim Andrews' "philosophical poetry toy" "Enigma n;" David Jhave Johnston's "wrinkled squirming typographic poems" "Softies;" Will Luers' video "The Walking Man;" mez and Shane Hinton's collaborative fiction ":terror(aw)ed patches:_;" and Ana Maria Uribe's "Typoems" and "Anipoems." It should be noted that Uribe, an Argentinian "visual poet" who died in 2004, produced her animated concrete poetry "Anipoems" in 1997, which makes them some of the earliest examples of Electronic Literature shown at this exhibit. Looking at "Anipoems" and "Typoems," written decades before in 1968, side by side provides a fascinating study of the way Uribe experimented with medium in that she shifts her attention from the static images generally associated with print based concrete poetry to the animated movement made possible by new technologies of production of the electronic medium.

Computer Stations 5: "Multimodal Narratives" and 6: "Multimodal Poetry" includes six works of fiction and five of poetry that employ visual, sonic, tactile, kinetic, and kinesthetic elements as major components of literary expression. While writers of print-based poetry envision visual elements such as line-length and in the case of concrete poetry, shape, for their work, Electronic Literature artists are often interested in utilizing multiple sensory modalities and, so, must conceptualize their work to include these in a coherent and effective way. In this regard, Andy Campbell's "The Flat" utilizes movement in a way that makes the user feel as if he or she is walking up stairs and into rooms and experiencing, first-hand, the story, while ambient sounds and silence grow more ominous as the story unfolds. Another narrative, Jonathan Harris et al's "Whale Hunt," recounts a whaling adventure eloquently using 3214 images composed in an artfully designed interface. John Kusch's animated poem "Red Lily" relates the pain of lost love through a series of three musical movements, with the tolling bell and the image of the calla lily suggesting the finality of its death. It should be noted that "First Screening" by Canadian writer bpNichol, constitutes the earliest

example of Electronic Literature shown in this exhibit. The work originated as 12 kinetic poems created with Apple's programming language (BASIC) and an Apple IIe computer. As technology changed, so did this work. There are now four versions available from the project website. Certainly viewing all provides insights into the notion of media translation as well as the relationship of art and technology.

Computer Station 7: "Vectors Projects" highlight two works sponsored by Vectors, a program and journal hosted at the University of Southern California. The two works included here, David Theo Goldberg & Stefka Hristova's "Blue Velvet," a story about Hurricane Katrina, and Lisa Lynch & Elena Razlogova's "Guantanamobile," a documentary comprised of interviews concerning the prisoners held at Guantanamo, encapsulate the overarching mission of Vectors—to provide support for projects that "*need*, for whatever reason, to exist in multimedia" and to "explore the immersive and experiential dimensions of emerging scholarly vernaculars across media platforms" ("Vectors Introduction"). Visitors to the exhibit will note the attention to visual design and socially aware subject matter found in these works, certainly hallmarks of Vector projects.

Computer Station 8: "Literary Games" includes three works that involves the user in gameful interaction and represent different modes of presentation and forms of engagement. Ian Bogost's "A Slow Year: Game Poems" utilizes the Atari Video Computer System for playing four short games that entice "sedate observation and methodical input." Nick Montfort's "Ad Verbum," an example of interactive fiction involving wordplay, is played primarily with interpreters Zoom or Frotz, though a web version is available but not suggested. Reiner Strasser, Dan Waber, and Jennifer Hill-Kaucher's ">>oh<<" is a web-based poem that unfolds whimsically through sound, image, animation, and the actions of the user.

Computer Station 9: "Future Writers" are works produced by undergraduates from across the U.S. and represent a variety of approaches and technologies. What they share is an innovative vision of storytelling and poetics and the promise of continued growth for Electronic Literature by the next generation of writers and artists, as well as programs and universities that support it.

Computer Station 10: "Invisible Seattle" celebrates the 25th anniversary of the project *Invisible Seattle: The Novel of Seattle, by Seattle*, also known as the *Invisible Seattle Literary Computer project*. Quoting Rob Wittig, one of the artists behind the project:

> This landmark work is just one project of Invisible Seattle, an electronic literature collective that wrote electronic literature together on line for a full, fun decade before the growth of the World Wide Web.
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> In August of 1983 the Invisibles, dressed as "literary workers" in white coveralls and hard hats with a question mark, used interviews,

questionnaires, and repurposed arcade games to coax the city into writing its own great civic novel. The novel was publicly compiled during the Bumbershoot Arts Festival in a theatrical installation using the "cyberno-ziggurat" *Scheherezade II:* "first of a new generation of literary computers." Seattle's mayor threw out the ceremonial first word. Realizing that they had on their hands a "database novel," the Invisibles remixed various versions and one version was published in book form.

Within weeks the group founded the electronic system IN.S.OMNIA (Invisible Seattle's Omnia) as an electronic magazine designed, in the words of James Joyce, "for the ideal reader with the ideal case of insomnia." IN.S.OMNIA was to be, as they wrote at the time: "Part literary database, part online literary magazine, and part free-form writing laboratory or 'public diary,' " Successes of the 1983-1993 run included collaborations with members of the French literary group Oulipo, Fulbright work with Jacques Derrida, and numerous innovative projects that inspired electronic literature of the '90s and '00s.

BIO of Invisible Seattle: You yourself may already be a citizen! Every time you read a book you enter Invisible Seattle! Known citizens include Philip Wohlstetter, Rob Wittig, Tom Grothus, Paul Cabarga. (email, 12/122/11)

Included with the work on this station are various volumes of the books published in conjunction with the project.

Some years ago, I wrote about what new media offered the field of rhetoric ("What New Media Offers," *Computers & Composition* 24 (2007) 214-217), pointing out that it opens up "vistas beyond the print artifact and beyond the orator's podium." It had occurred to me then as it certainly has become a truth I hold dear now that the "computer is not a prostheses" nor is it a *tool* that helps artists do what they do, but rather it "*is* the medium in which they work, and the texts it and [they] produce together, the offspring of that union." As I say this, I am reminded of my mother, a painter of landscapes and portraits, who spent what seemed like an inordinate amount of time discerning which brush to use for a stroke or mixing the right shade of blue for a sky, for these technologies were vital for the production of her work. When asked what her medium was, she would answer without hesitation, "oil." What Electronic Literature lays bare is a shift in consciousness about what "the literary" can entail, and I see that what I said about the value of digital media to rhetoric back in 2007, which in internet time seems so long ago, applies also to literature today.