

# **ROADTRIP**

**A writer's exploration of cyberspace as writing space**

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## ROADWAY

### Writerly question markers along the cyberspace highway

#### *What is cyberliterature?*

One of the best things about a new medium is that it is wide open for reinvention literally as it is being invented. That is most evident in the terms that float and skim and vanish and now and then stick long enough to enter the language—terms such as computer, internet, world wide web, cyberspace, hypertext. For this discussion, let's look at some of the key terms from a creative writer's point of view:

Cyberspace: a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators... a graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data...(1)

In his 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, William Gibson coined the term "cyberspace," and it has come to be known as the medium in which the internet lives, and breathes, and has its virtual being.

But what really is cyber-"space"?

Maybe we should first ask, what we consider "print-space." Is it the space on a printed book page, the six inch by nine inch piece of bound paper? Hardly. Instead, we'd probably answer that the space of a novel is the space the words describe, a space that can be another century or around the world. But the space of the internet, while it may involve, as in print, the spaces that the language take you imaginatively, *cyberspace* is the medium itself. As we read in cyberspace, we click on links that "take" us to other "spaces." We "go" from one site to another...author to author, text to text, images appearing instantly before us. Cyberspace's "space" is the space of the electronic medium itself. (2)

It is a place of "simultaneous information in which we share images that arrive instantly from all quarters at once," wrote Marshall McLuhan so prophetically decades ago. The true space of a bound and printed book conjures one type of hallucination of space. The true space of the internet, courtesy of electricity and an internet access is the computer screen. In fact, what we see is really a double writing space, if we peek behind the

screen's "curtain." Every word we see on the page is really in two languages, the above text, and the "neath text," as one cyberpoet put it, the secret language of the internet, "hypertext markup language," or [HTML](#). All the places we "go" are really "brought" to that screen by that secret language and most basically, the light inside the screen. In fact, McLuhan goes as far as saying that "communication takes place not by mere transportation of data from point to point." It is, in effect, "the sender who is sent, and it is the sender who becomes the message."

In short, what we see there truly is "virtual," Gibson's hallucination—real...but not really—a consensual "dream-narrative" experience via our invitation. As Alt-X's Mark Amerika has his "medium," the [Techno Shaman](#) explain it: "The first thing you must understand is that...[i]t is no longer possible to disassociate the dream from the real. Intuit your dreams and accept them as part of what's real and you will become empowered."

Anyone who connects to the internet, who wanders through cyberspace, knows that empowering feeling of getting information on a screen from around the world in nanoseconds. Everything that is happening the moment it happens, much in the way [McLuhan](#) foresaw media in the technological age. We are connected to an electrical source that connects to a galaxy of "lexias" that fill the internet's cyberspace—and we can hardly make ourselves turn it off, much like television, the medium McLuhan so famously announced was the "message."

The seemingly infinite linkage from one side of the virtual universe and back Mark Amerika calls "evolving narrative." It can also be "cyberbabble." It can feel like Jorge Luis Borges' infinite [Library of Babel](#) which contains all books, "ever lost with all their pathways of unmeaning and meaning hopelessly intertwined"...

...expressing all that it is given to express, in all languages. Everything: the minutely detailed history of the future, the archangels' autobiographies, the faithful catalogue of the library, thousands and thousands of false catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of those catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of the true catalogue, the Gnostic gospel of Basilides, the commentary on that gospel, the true story of your death, the translation of every book in all languages, the interpolation of every book in all books.

But as with most things that are conceptual, any explanation is just a word picture. As one professor summarized the effort for his students: "Cyberspace is a way of grasping something that cannot be grasped except by means of metaphor. If time is a river, cyberspace is a continent lit up at night, across which we bound like action heroes, covering unthinkable distances." (3)

*What is hypertext?*

The magic, the hallucination that we now so commonly call the internet, the vast

universal library of the world wide web, is made possible by that galaxy of links, or lexias, created by hypertext. What does the word "hyper-text" mean?

First, what does text mean? The word **text** itself comes from the Latin word for weaving and for interwoven material, and it has come to have extraordinary accuracy of meaning in the case of word processing. When we write text, we are interweaving our thoughts and words into sentences with syntax that makes textual sense. **Hypertext** then, adds linkage to that interweaving. It is the "textual dynamic" that allows text to travel, and by its nature, offers a creative tool for the writer in this new medium.

The term was coined in 1965 by visionary **Ted Nelson** whose **Xanadu** project, is considered the inspiration for many of today's internet dynamics. But the idea of such a machine with a dynamic of info links, goes back as far as 1945 when **Vannevar Bush** posed the idea as a match to the way our minds work.

Links—that jumping from webpage to webpage that inspired the familiar information superhighway metaphor was foreseen by theorist Roland Barthes (4) in 1974 as text blocks of words and images linked electronically by multiple paths or trails in "an open-ended, perpetually unfinished textuality described by the terms 'link, node, network, web, and path.'" Barthes suggests the text is a "**galaxy of signifiers**," reversible, that we gain access to it by several entrances, no one of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach."

Think page as cyberspace; think text, then think hypertext that allows jumps from information text to text into infinity...or, as artists do, think of the entirety of it as a creative medium to explore. As one interactive fiction theorist explained metaphorically, it is a territory where "**the links are the roads, the reader is a traveler, clicking is a mode of transportation, and the itinerary selected by the traveler is a 'story.'**"

*What is cyberliterature?*

"Poetry has entered the electronic landscape," declares poet Loss Pequeno Glazier in his essay "**Jumping to Occlusions**." Even if such a landscape suggests "images of electronic video games or machine-readable iambics... the fact is that the electronic world is a world predominantly of writing." Though this writing often seems eclipsed by its mode of transmission (electronic mail and the world wide web...), Glazier believes this is not that different from all previous writing, eclipsed by other communication such as "the book the stone tablet, and the scroll." Like all previous types of writing, electronic writing also engages the double "mission" of any writing—"to be about a subject, but also to be about the medium through which it is transmitted."

What is cyberliterature? It is literature about an idea but also about cyberspace, the unique medium in which it exists. Most of the creative writing done especially for cyberspace is hypertextual in some fashion. In its earliest days, as with most things connected to the internet, electronic "hypertext" literature boomed in the 1990s then seemed to bust only to reinvent itself. As critic Carrie **McMillan** points out, there's now

"a renewed emphasis on the creative possibilities offered by the Internet." And that means hypertext. The hypertextual dynamic, the way words and images can be linked to other words and images, creates a whole new creative medium for the creative writer. As two early hypertextual writers explained the brand new form in 1991: "This is a new kind of fiction and a new kind of reading. The form of the text is rhythmic, looping on itself in patterns and layers that gradually accrete meaning, just as the passage of time and events does in one's lifetime."<sup>(5)</sup>

Hypertext "could be construed as kind of Literary MTV," explains Alt-X's Mark Amerika. It is a reading in which the readers/participants actively click their way into new writing or textual spaces (that now might include graphics, moving pictures, sound, animation, 3-D modeling, etc.). Calling these hypertext jumps or links "alterna-reading choices" he explains hypertext as a new literary tool: "Hypertext, as a concept, suggests an alternative to the more rigid, authoritarian linearity of conventional book-contained text...In the middle of reading or viewing a hypertext (and isn't it always a middle-reading?), the reader/participant is given a number of **options to select from...**"

Hypertextuality can be at the heart of a creative piece or it can be just another tool in the hands of a creative writer. The hyperliterary dimension of a poem, for example, doesn't have to be a required part of a reading, but can add depth.

*What are its subgenres called?*

Literature created in a digital environment can't exist for long without adapting to the new medium. And that cyberspace adaptation has most recently coined the term **hypermedia** or new media to include graphics, sound, video, animation, and other media dimensions.

But even that specific definition isn't all that new. Early cyberliterature expert George Landow saw hypermedia as simply hypertext that includes "**verbal discourse**" via images, maps, diagrams, and sound that expands the notion of text beyond the solely verbal. New technology, now standard on most 21st century computers, though, has created subgenres that bring hypermedia into the literary mainstream beyond, perhaps, what Landow might have envisioned. For the purposes of this exploration, the term "cyberlit" or "cyberliterature" will be used, but the creative medium of cyberspace is still so new and continually re-invented, that no real agreement seems to exist on what name it should be known as, much less what its exact definition should be.

Names abound for cyberpoetry, for instance: flash poetry liquid poetry virtual poetry visual poetry, soft poetry, electronic poetry, computer poetry, the list goes on, as does the confusion, of course. Electronic poetry, or epoeury, is often used to describe both the most innovative cyber creations as well as a traditional piece of "print" poetry available on the internet. In fact, the terms vary so widely in the new digital poetry subgenre that **Jorge Luiz Antonio** offers an entire article on the terms used in this emerging subgenre by its practitioners, from click poetry to holopoetry, along with links to poet's sites or works.

In describing the dynamic of the ever-expanding, ever-fluctuating subgenre cyberworld, cyberpoet [Robert Kendall](#) describes his own labels:

Though "hypertext" didn't fully describe all aspects of the work I was doing, this term had the benefit of being already familiar to many people, especially after the rise of the Web. So I became a "hypertext" poet. Some of the pieces I'm currently working on aren't very hypertextual and rely more upon other techniques, such as animation. So am I now a "hypertext poet with Flash tendencies"?

Epoetry may function as an umbrella term for all things poetic on the internet, but for fiction online, the term efiction doesn't quite work as well, esp. since "ebook" is already in the language, usually, to mean a traditional "print" book accessible on computer. Terms such as hyperfiction, hyperbook, electronic fiction and cyberfiction seem to be used interchangeably, if fitfully, and as the genres continue to meld, game-playing worlds known as interactive fiction, computer narratives, and digital fiction, add to the mix. And to add to the confusion, there's also the word "[cybertext](#)," used in the computer narrative world to mean a text that—unlike hypertext's "all possible" linkage to all of cyberspace—is limited to specific computers or "machines" operated by readers choosing from many storylines to experience a narrative.

If names for cyberliterature seem to blur, cyberspace's unique nature also has a knack of blurring the lines between the genres, writer [M.D. Coverley](#) explains:

Although I have published some poetry, I consider myself a fiction writer. The appellations that I normally employ are Electronic, Hypermedia, and Interactive. However, all of those "new" descriptors modify the essential project of fictional narrative writing. The fact that some of my works have been published as poetry, I think, draws attention to the nature of the WWW. The Web tends to favor short segments of prose-text is difficult to see on the screen, readers don't like to scroll, the medium itself encourages a multiplicity of sensory inputs.

A poem is "a machine made out of words," or so poet W.C. Williams was once to have said. "It's odd to think it so, given the utterly human nature of many poems," ponders cyberpoet Jim Andrews. Yet there is a sense in which it's true, he believes: "Language itself is surely a technology insofar as it is a tool made by people; our tools and technologies are not dumb and lifeless externalities that we pick up at need to do a job; instead, they often are truly extensions of ourselves: extensions of our minds and feelings and imaginations (language); extensions of our eyes (electron and radio telescopes); extensions of our memory (books); extensions of our voices (telephones); *etc.*"

It is an uneasy relationship we have with our machines. The creative magic waiting within the hallucination of this new machine medium is exciting for the innovative, cyber-culture artist, but any 21st century writer working with all the latest "extensions" might feel their ever-evolving connection to the writer's "dream space." As Andrews explains: "Poets are familiar with the odd feeling of seeing their poems in type...it's as though a part of themselves had somehow been transferred by machines to the external and other. There they are, our "silent running soul devices."

## *How is cyberliterature different from print literature?*

There is always the page.

Whether we read the text on it and write the text on it—whether the page is a piece of paper or white space on a computer screen, we think, as readers and writers, in printed text on a "page."

But what happens when a writer, gazing at the computer screen's "page," wonders, "If this can be created, what else might be?" The answer is the difference between literature created for cyberspace and for print. Or as expressed by early cyberwriters Carolyn Guyer and Martha Petry, it's the difference between "sailing the islands and standing on the dock watching the sea. One is not necessarily better than the other." (5) Some basic differences are worthy of notice for the cyberwriter:

*Cyberliterature favors the short form.*

Electronic literature is shorter than traditional print literature. Content follows form, as we know. The space of the internet is the screen, and it seems to dictate that the more involved and creative the piece, the shorter it should be. It is also a logistical problem, say critic Edward Picot. "The longer a text is, the more effort it would take to sustain a high level of multimedia effects all the way [through](#)."

*Writing in cyberspace "moves."*

[Electronic Labyrinth's](#) creators, in explaining one of theorist Jacques Derrida's concepts, suggest that words "move" from their original meaning. Writing forces a separation of ideas from "their source of utterance." Once the source of an idea is no longer "there" to explain the ideas behind the printed words, the words can take on unintended connotations for a reader.

Electronic text also moves but in quite different ways. Michael Joyce, hyperfiction pioneer, once said that print "stays itself" while hypertext "[replaces itself](#)." Hypertextual writing seems to have an ephemeral quality.

The materials of the technology have a direct effect on the actual path of writing, states Loss Pequeno Glazier. "In the electronic environment, the materials shift...Fonts rage wistful or out of control and the "size" of paper irrelevant..." Electronic texts move writing into charged space, where words themselves begin to move from context to "dystext": pieces or fragments of text. "This is a dance outside the linear, outside the line," Glazier believes. "An interesting place for writing...as they say in Texas, "real cowboys don't line dance." How could this ever work, especially in poetry where there may not be a narrative flow? L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet Ron Silliman once wrote, "When words are, meaning soon follows. Where words join, writing is." This is

hypertextual writing on the web, a writing based on [links](#).

Early hypermedia poet Brian Kim Stefans was one of the first to grasp the idea of the possibilities of a cyberpoetry created with words freed from the page and the cross genres waiting there. He alluded to this switch in an introduction to his genre-expanding "[Dreamlife of Letters](#)," referring to earlier attempts being "antique 'concrete' mode, belonging to a 'much older aesthetic.'" With "Dreamlife," the surreal result gives a whole new meaning to "words that move."

*Hypertext works like our minds.*

Hypertextual writing works more like our minds does. Most print text found in books stresses lineality, a "one-thing-at-a-time" way of thinking, as media theorist Marshall [McLuhan](#) expressed it. But not so with electronic media based on links.

"What are links but faults in the monolinear imagination?" asks cyberpoet Loss Pequeno Glazier. Freud wrote about parapraxis, faults in reading, writing, and speaking, "slips of the tongue," that happen when the mind shifts into an associative disposition. "Although Freud would probably suggest that conclusions may be drawn from parapraxis," states Glazier, "the ability to read linked writings depends not on conclusion but occlusion, or an aberration of the eye, literally and homophonously...a fusion of parts extending into a plethora of [directions](#)."

*Hypertextual writing is "decentered."*

Instead of text blocks flowing steadily down the page, as they would in a printed text, a hypertext narrative can offer many "paths" through the structure of blocks and links provided by the author. It is, what theorists call, "decentered." A hypertextual text has no fixed center; rather, its center keeps shifting as the reader chooses links and "rides" their trains of thought. "From the side of authors, the computer becomes an instrument on which they both compose and perform their work; from the side of readers, each time they access the work they choose links that create a single actualised experience out of innumerable other potential ones," explains theorist [Paul Delaney](#).

In other words, the creative piece, according to reader choice, moves from one link to another which "create" various readings of the same piece of literature—not page 1 to page 2, necessarily, but perhaps page 1 to page 15 to a footnote, to a link on the WWW, back to page 15. It's all up to the reader's choices offered by the writer's skill. Of course, the art comes in manipulating the whole to create the desired effect or effects on the reader, whatever choices the reader makes. In a hypertext fiction, we might refer to a path as a storyline or storylines. Beginnings and endings, the basic demands of any book, now are up for debate. With hypertext, a writer is free to discard old structural conventions and traditional ideas of [closure](#)—often leaving the "problem" of the ending to the reader.

*Cyberlit can offer "reader/writer interactivity."*

Theorists call a text that can be changed or manipulated by reader input a "writerly" text; a text that elicits nothing more than page turning is a readerly text.

Hypertextual writing, allows the reader into the "meaning" of a work that is reminiscent of the way [Walter Benjamin](#) explains the difference between distraction and concentration in viewing art. He tells the legend of the Chinese painter who when viewing his finished painting, enters the work, fully absorbed by it.

The key word in hyperliterature is choice—the writer enjoys creating different ways to read a story and readers enjoy "creating" their own story told version by not just turning a page, but creating a path, "entering" the work. As expressed, the dynamic, cyberliterature offers two kinds of such interactivity, "full" and "selective." (6)

In selected interactivity, the reader chooses from as many choices as the author allows, creating combinations that when done well have a fascinating literary effect. The choice may be as complex as a long poem by Stephanie Strickland offering three navigations methods—the random reading, the complete reading, and the link-driven reading—entitled [The Ballad of Sand and Harry Soot](#). (The piece, winner of 1999 *Boston Review* prize, is also in print version, offering another reading experience, yet a tellingly different one.)

But even simple interactivity can offer a very non-print literature experience, such as a short piece by Robert Kendall, [Study in Shades](#).

Full interactivity offers a reader the chance to add to the piece, much like a computer game or a piece of shareware gone literary. These cyberworks can range from dark creations, such as ["Fractured,"](#) (requires Flash) to light-hearted, shareware-style literary games such as ["Field of Dreams."](#)

*Cyberlit can redefine "authorship."*

Of course, such interactive works beg the question of authorship, another critical theory topic cyberspace inspires. Critics Roland Barthes and Michael Foucault are well-known for writing about what is called the "Death of the Author," but not until the cyberspace era did the concept ring true. Anyone who's surfed the internet understand this now. "We are dealing here with an electronic orality that contrasts with the much more focused encounter between a single book and a solitary reader," explains [Delaney](#).

The idea of "author"—the idea of intellectual rights, of owning one's creation—originally came with print culture and the Gutenberg Press. There was a time when texts we now call "literary" (narratives, folk tales, epics, tragedies, comedies) were circulated without any thought about the identity of their [authors](#).

But, in truth, as theorist David Bolter writes, "The sense of infinite possibilities offered by hypertext is an [illusion](#)."

And, in most cyberspace works, except for those offering "full" interactivity where the reader is offered "agency," to become a "co-author," it is an illusion created by an author, no matter how many choices a reader might have. Be it hypertextual fiction, digital fiction or hypertextual poetry, the movement is still in the hands of the "author/creator/writer." Whether we enjoy the dance, and maybe even feel we, the writerly reader, add a flair to the dance, it is still, ultimately, the author's dance we are dancing.

*Cyberspace has no "originals."*

With printed text, the story or poem there is always an original that one can return to, a visceral first edition, however many new print runs or revised editions there may be. But what is the original of a hypertext work of art? In the world of the computer, the question makes little sense. There are no originals in cyberspace. The shift from ink to electronic code, what Jean Baudrillard calls the shift from the "tactile" to the "digital," an information technology that combines fixity and flexibility, order and accessibility, but at a cost. Since electronic text-processing is a matter of manipulating computer-manipulated codes, all texts that the reader-writer encounters on the screen are virtual texts.

The very fact that a cyber document or creation transmits and transforms experience at the same time limits it to the realm of "simulacra," a debased reflection, understood as inferior to the abstraction from which it is derived." It challenges the very notion of a "true copy" or authentic rendering.

Walter Benjamin might have mentioned the missing quality to be its "aura"—its special, one-of-a-kindness—what 20th century humankind lost in a world of reproductions. In a cyberspace context, the loss of "aura" might seem to fit, except not even the original is "original," since even as it's being created it is just a series of zeros and ones behind the screen text. "All texts the reader and the writer encounter on a computer screen exist as a version created specifically for them while an electronic primary version resides in the computer's memory," explains theorist Jay David Boulter:

If you hold a magnetic tape or optical disk up to the light, you will not see text at all...In the electronic medium, several layers of sophisticated technology must intervene between the writer or reader and the coded text. There are so many levels of deferral that the reader or writer is hard put to identify the text at all: is it on the screen, in the transistor memory, or on the disk?

*Cyberspace fosters new "engagements."*

Cyberspace, as writing and reading space, beyond being a new medium for the computer-savvy writers, is different from print space in a very basic way—its accessible to the masses. And that has manifested itself in unusual ways. For example, poetry has seen a new birth on-line, which intimates that print was holding poetry back. When

Garrick Davis founded [Contemporary Poetry Review](#) in 1998 as an online poetry journal, the whole genre was considered to be, "if not disreputable, then certainly distasteful." Established poets did not submit their work to such journals and academics "frowned upon them as neither popular nor peer-reviewed." But the situation changed, and remarkably so, he explains: "In the world of literature, electronic magazines are vastly more popular than their print counterparts in the terms which matter most: readership. There is, suddenly, an audience for poetry and criticism that is much larger than anyone had dared to imagine. " The little magazines are "little" no more. Why? As he put it, "The reading public, it turns out, was not turned off by poetry, but by print."

Or as Mark Amerika quipped, it is ["the word's revenge on TV."](#)

*Cyberspace fosters new cybergenres.*

Cyberliterature has also moved beyond link-driven text on screen. A hypertextual piece that includes other "media" such as like film, photography, sound, text, image is called "hypermedia" or "new media" as even newer technologies are being created and incorporated in a fusion of arts in cyberspace. An example is the new subgenre created by the wide accessibility of Flash technology now standard on most computers of the 21st century.

"Today's poet almost certainly can't help but think about how their poem looks on a page. But what happens when we take the words out of the poem and the letters out of the words and play with their relation to the page?" asks the editors of the online magazine, Poems That Go. "What happens when the visual form of the poem is as important as the words that [make it](#)?" This one piece of software allows the creative writer/artist a chance to answer those questions, as seen in these simple, early flash poems:

[Xylo](#)  
[The Dancing Rhinoceri of Bangladesh](#)

Flash, also, along with other newer technologies, allows for a subgenre called digital fiction, hyperliterature with equal parts text and design. One such website, [Digital Fiction](#), created as an "exploration into accessible and engaging writing for the internet, exemplifies this new cyber subgenre. As its editors explain: "These works are not 'e-books" or hypertext sites in the traditional sense, nor do they adhere to the usual styles and standards incorporated into 'quality' Flash sites. The aim of Digital Fiction is to use Flash to create interesting ways of telling 'stories', to offer a blend of challenging writing, user-entertainment and user-interaction."

(For an ever-developing collection of critical articles on poetry and the new media, see [PoemsThatGo essay archive](#).)

But even this purely cyberspace creation can't escape our culture's deep print text roots as seen in this book-loving piece called [The Rut](#), "The self-published book that never got past the introductory page." (When in doubt, click. Requires Flash 7.0)

## *Will books become obsolete?*

A future world without books?

In 1992, Robert Coover wrote a now-famous essay for the *New York Times Book Review* about hypertext literature provocatively entitled "[The End of Books](#)." In the world of video transmissions, cellular phones, fax machines, computer networks, "and in particular out in the humming digitalized precincts of avant-garde computer hackers, you will often hear it said that the print medium is a doomed and outdated technology, a mere curiosity of bygone days destined soon to be consigned forever to those dusty unattended museums we now call libraries..."

That same year, cybertheorist [George Landow](#) claimed that writers of print literature should feel threatened by hypertext, "just as writers of romances and epics should have felt threatened by the novel...Descendants, after all, offer continuity with the past but only at the cost of replacing it."

"The book is obsolete," declared theorist [Marshall McLuhan](#) years earlier than Coover and Landow. He was quick, though, to explain himself: "Obsolescent does not mean extinction. Quite the contrary. For example, handwriting has been 'obsolete' since Gutenberg, and certainly since [the typewriter], there is more handwriting today than there ever has been." Instead, the book, he suggests, will be raised to an "art form."

Books going "extinct" seems unthinkable. The west has been called "[the civilization of the book](#)." Our religions, philosophies, literatures, our very conception of the world itself is inextricably woven into the idea of the book. But the very notion makes us consider a few concepts we take for granted. Cyberspace and hypertext forces us to reconsider the idea of writing "space," for instance, the relationship between narrative and the physical space of the "[book](#)" that's so deeply a part of our lives and thinking.

"Book culture, based on the alphabet, not only produced individual civilized Graeco-Roman man but it also led, via Gutenberg, to the development of world-wide commodity markets and pricing systems," [McLuhan](#) declared. "From it derive the assembly line and the order of battle, the managerial hierarchy and the departmentalizations of [scholarly decorum](#)." In other words, life as we know it today.

Print technology fostered the idea of the individual, who experienced ideas, the world, in the pages of books instead of via village oral culture. It redefined the audience for literature by transforming it from a small group of manuscript readers or listeners to the masses who bought books to read in the privacy of their homes. (7)

Yet McLuhan pointed out that technology—television, radio, film and now 24 hour news cycle and the internet—have circled us back to **tribal**, that is, oral culture where we experience the world as a community instead of individually as it has been since Gutenberg's gift of mass literacy and its civilization building results. **His work** pointed to two technological revolutions that have fashioned western civilization as it is today: Gutenberg's press in the fifteenth century taught people to think in straight lines and the visual order of the printed page, and electricity in the nineteenth century made possible the telephone, television, computers et al, which taught people to envision many ideas at the same time—which is the very definition of hypertextual cyberspace.

Those historical shifts were truly mental shifts as well. As one hypertext theorist put it, "They signal not simply the demise of the bookmark industry or relief from the dangers of papercuts," but a way of thinking about the way we organize, conceive and imagine the world around us. To think of the world **not as a "Book"** but as a hypertext is to conceive of it as a heterogeneous, mutable, interactive space where meaning is inscribed between links and between readers, "not enclosed between the limits of a front and back cover."

Does the future hold a world without books as we know them? Even though conceptually we, in the 21st century, view the world and its information more like cyberspace than a book, we still are very much a civilization based on "the book." We are psychologically and historically "linked" to it, sometimes in ways we hardly notice. For example, electronic publisher Alt-X explains its **Virtual Imprint** line of ebooks brings "web-readers a must-have library of works" by some of the most "provocative artists in contemporary new media culture": ("As eclectic writing makes its footprint into the electrosphere, we no longer ask "What is literature?" but, more importantly, "What is literature's exit strategy?") However, directly below the announcement are these words: "Buy our new **print-on-demand books.**"

But no medium truly becomes **extinct**, states critic Amanda Griscom. "One allows us to see from here, another from there, a third from still another perspective; taken together they give us a more complete whole, a greater truth."

Or says Robert Kendall in his essay "**Hypertext: Foe to Print?**": "Hypertext fiction is unlikely to kill linear fiction...It is, however, causing many authors to divert their efforts from print to the computer screen if they have an impetus toward multilinear expression or simply the desire to try something new."

Perhaps, though, Marshall McLuhan said it best: " **"I believe that artists, in all media, respond soonest to the challenges of new pressures...They also show us ways of living with new technology without destroying earlier forms and achievements.**

## *Is traditional "print" lit in cyberspace?*

The vast majority of what we see in cyberspace is a simulation of print text, and that includes all sorts of literature as well, at least short forms. Book-length print classics suffering as they do from the "scroll dread" that has made commercial ebooks less than successful and are only sporadically found online, [Project Gutenberg](#), with its 12,000 ebook literary classics, notwithstanding.

That said, the breadth of print lit text that's available, especially from a critical, research, and creative point of views is voluminous in the way only cyberspace can offer.

While finding most classic literature texts will still mean a trip to the public library, a universe of critical, scholarly and academic texts are available online (naturally enough, considering the [original research aspect of the internet](#).)

Scholars and other lovers of all things literary were among the first to embrace this "information superhighway" dynamic, sometimes taking on enormous projects via volunteer help, much like Project Gutenberg has done since 1971. Sites such as [Poetry Corner](#) and [The Electronic Canterbury Tales](#) are often the pet projects of a few true-believers who want to foster student access and understanding of their favorite art forms or literary works, melding the world of print with the world of the internet, sometimes in inventive ways. [Plagiarist.com](#), for example, will create, for a price, downloadable ebooks containing an analysis of a poem, including author and period, bibliography, glossary and writing tips—in other words, a web-generated hypertextual printed text. Many print classics in the public domain, especially cyberspace-compatible literary works are also lightly hypertexted, such as this hypertextual treatment of an [Ezra Pound poem](#).

Some sites act as accessible archives such as [Great Books Online](#), [UVA American Studies@UVA Hypertexts](#), and [Electronic Poetry Center](#).

Others such as [Kairos](#) (a "rhetoric, technology and pedagogy" forum), strive to "push the boundaries in academic publishing at the same time bridge the gap between print and digital publishing cultures."

Cyberspace, via hypermedia, also offers access to oral documents, such as [WiredforBooks'](#) "never-before-heard uncut radio interviews of late 20th century literary figures."

Sites will come and go, but the concept—easy accessibility to classic literature and its criticism—is no doubt is here to stay.

### *Print Literature via Literary E-Journals*

An ever-expanding list of e-literary magazines with quality and content to rival print literature is also beginning to showcase cyberspace's potential for both hypertextual and "print text" literature. Dozens of "little" magazines have found a natural home on the world wide web, their circulation not so "little" any longer, their archival life spans now a part of cyberspace's "forever-now" dynamic. As one e-journal's tagline puts it: "never in and never out of print."[\(Mudlark\)](#) As long as there is a server connected to the internet, e-magazines and their contributor's work will be forever accessible.

Most online literary magazines are still very "print text"-based, works being either devoid of hypertextual aspects or designed marginally hypertextual, perhaps only to "turn the page." Nevertheless, the online access alone adds to their reading, be they from a journal's archive or from recent issues:

[Vacuuming the Dead](#)

[Four Poems/Suspension](#)

Online "print-text" literary journals offer creative nonfiction—creative, critical or interviews via audio:

[I, Traveler](#)

[Jay David Bolter](#)

[Norman Mailer](#)

E-chapbooks:

[Cafe Buffe, a musical comedy](#)

Short-short fiction and prose poetry:

[Double Room](#)

Forgotten, overlooked classics:

[Octopus' Recovery Project](#)

Other "print-text" literary journals delight in a fusion of not only print e-literature, cyberliterature, but also guerilla poetry invention (and possibly gumballs):

[GumballPoetry](#)

As for books, online cyberlit "book" publishers continue to define what that means in cyberspace, including offering "print-on-demand" capabilities as well as online, downloadable ebooks:

[Coach House Books](#)

[Alt-X](#)

[Eastgate](#)

[UBU Editions](#)

(For more on publishing, see ["How to publish cyberlit?"](#))

## *Is it really literarily "new"?*

Cyberspace is certainly new, the computer era is certainly new, the entire medium is certainly new. But is the emerging literature being created with the new medium's hypertextuality "new?"

Here's poet Charles Bernstein's [answer](#):

Or as poet Millie Niss whispers as you "wand" over her witty poem, [The Dancing Rhinoceri of Bangladesh](#): "The surrealist did this without all this technology."

John Barth would see nothing "new" in it. In 1967, he published a controversial essay called "[The Literature of Exhaustion](#)" which read like a "manifesto of postmodernism." In it, he proposed that the conventional modes of literary representation had been "used up," their possibilities consumed through over-use. All is tired in literature; no new forms are left to be invented, he declared.

By definition, hypertextual writing inspires a non-linear narrative technique, a technique in itself that isn't literarily new. Novelists and poets have long experimented with ways of conquering the normal demands of narrative, from structure to marginalia and footnotes, writers such as Laurence Sterne, James Joyce, Vladimir Nabokov, Julio Cortazar, Italo Calvino and Cervantes, not to mention T.S. Eliot, William Burroughs and even William Gibson. "The structural interest offered by hypertext is as yet nothing dramatically different from what writers have been doing throughout the last century," believes critic Carrie [McMillan](#).

In fact, a case can be made for the nonlinear, fragmented roots of hypertext to go back much further than that. Even before Gutenberg, texts were often collections of scrolls, sorted in no fixed sequence. Non-linear is the structure of [The Book](#) as it's called in cybertheory circles—the Bible—whose structure pioneered the idea of what makes all books, since Gutenberg's printing of the King James Version of it. Maybe the most famous example in our literature of a single story told in a nonlinear fashion is the Bible's story of Jesus, points out critic [Edward Picot](#) "The Gospels tell the story of Jesus from four different viewpoints, sometimes with quite substantial differences of style, detail and chronological sequence...They do not have the same unity as a conventional linear narrative: they have a different kind of unity instead, more ambiguous, more fragmented, and more challenging to the reader."

Does cyber-hypertextuality, then, offer anything unique, though, for the aspiring creative cyberwriter?

In "[The End of the Book](#)" Robert Coover says yes: "True freedom from the tyranny of the line is perceived as only really possible now at last with the advent of hypertext, written and read on the computer, where the line in fact does not exist unless one invents and implants it in the text."

Cybertheorist Paul Delaney says [yes and no](#):

Hypertext can create a kind of "zero degree" narrative, entirely liberated from the sequential imperatives of a standard plot. But does this achieve any more than those books of the 1960s that were issued unbound, so that the pages could be shuffled and read in any order?

Poet Jorge Luiz Antonio says [yes](#). In fact, he believes the "vehicle" on which a cyberwork is read alone forces any reading of literature to be classified as "new":

The use of a computer, even if we are reading a piece of traditional literature such as a sonnet, implies a mediation which alters the final product. Access to poetry through a machine is totally different from opening a book, a magazine, a newspaper, or a copybook. The computer re-makes the text.

What about cyberpoetry?

Some believe the novelty of hypertext poetry is waning because poetry is itself a kind of hypertext, relying far more on associative connections than narrative ones. Cyberpoet Brian Kim Stefans not only questions the "newness" but even the validity of cyberpoetry as a true form: "If cyberpoetry is a genuine verse-form it will have several singular positive definitions. I can define it only in negatives: 1) the lack of limitation to black and white words on a page, 2) the lack of the possibility for mechanical reproduction (there being no original), 3) the lack of closure and the lack of the [lack of choice](#)."

Some believe cyberpoetry is concrete poetry "fulfilled" as [UbuWeb](#) explains:

"Concrete poetry's historical move from the poetic line to the visual linguistic constellation, predicted parallel moves in computing from command line interface to graphical user interfaces. With concrete poetry's implied dynamism and hyperspace, the concrete poets seemed to be begging for multimedia to enter into their practice. Since the technology was not yet available, they stuck with the page. With the advent of the web, we've seen the fulfillment of this tendency...As more artists flock to the web, many become unknowing practitioners of concrete poetry as streaming and morphing of language moves to the forefront of graphical web-based practices." (See also Winter 2004

edition of [PoemsThatGo](#) for more on visual poetry's concrete literary roots including helpful links.)

"This post-typographic and non-linear disunion is no news to poetics," declares Loss Pequeno Glazier in [Jumping to Occlusions](#), and answers with a list of poetic influences: Pound Futurism, Dada, Bernstein, McCaffery, Silliman, Grenier, Fisher, Sheppard, Hocquard, Royet-Journoud, "the radical typographies of Howe and Drucker, Antin's improvisations, the translations of Joris, Rothenberg's ethnopoetics, redeployments of language by O'Sullivan, Bergvall, MacCormack, Brossard, Leggott, Hejinian, Retallack, and Weiner, and the alleatories of Mac Low and Cage, and the work of many writers presently at work point in different ways to various forms of nonlinearity."

What then is news to poetics? "It is the play of pieces that forms the tropes of the electronic web," is Glazier's response.

Just as in life, there's a tension in narrative between the sensation of time as a linear experience, one thing following another, and time as a "patterning of interrelated experiences reflected upon as though it had a geography and could be mapped." Hypertext can actually create these spatial forms that the reader is only vaguely conscious of when reading a print novel, explains theorist Paul [Delaney](#).

Hypermedia offers something "new" in the way classic texts are reconsidered, much like postmodern [bricolage](#), the use of the bits and pieces of older artifacts to produce a new, if not "original," work of art. Such hypermedia treatment of classic literature not only reinterprets but offers new pleasures and new accessibilities. Three hypermedia examples of this new-but-not-new form reinvented via hypertextual elements are (requires Flash):

- Alis Yung's rendering of a [Yeats poem](#).
- Charles Demuth and Megan Sapnar's "Figure 5 Media Series," inspired by a [William Carlos William's poem](#).
- Natalie Borchkin's re-telling of the Jorge Luis Borges short story, [The Intruder](#), as a dual commentary on pop culture and anti-fable, that begins as fun and games then turns subtly into a disturbing feminist statement. (Notice, also, below, that cyberspace can offer instantaneously the cyberfiction, its critique, and the Borges short story in original Spanish.)
  - [Introduction and critique](#)
  - [Borges' "Intruder"](#) in original "print-text" Spanish

From the deeply literary texts to pop culture staples, cyberliterature, then, builds on the past to create a new "new." The melding of all that's gone before layered onto and into this new medium can offer pleasures in a multitude of engaging ways, whatever our knowledge or opinion of its literary history might be.

"Much pleasure is derived from not understanding each other, much serious social

revenue from reflecting on these losses, and cyberpoetry is best positioned to explore this," explains [Brian Kim Stefans](#):

...for there is only good verse, bad verse, and chaos. Not understanding this sentence, or never understanding it as Eliot understood it, or not knowing that Eliot wrote it and not caring a whit—both its provisional meanings and its non-enduring emotions caught in a seductive, obscene (off-stage) embrace—is one of the many pleasures that cyberpoetry can provide.

Might future technology make a difference? Probably not. The task facing cyberwriters, as the Electronic Labyrinth theorists pose it, is the "necessity of making language and its increasingly outdated technical modes live again": ["No amount of RAM will, in itself, make a work succeed, but Marshall McLuhan reminds us, the "medium is the message."](#) Writers working in a new medium, no doubt, will find new messages and new ways of refashioning the old ones.

## ***How about some site-seeing?***

Without the editorial filter that print publishing offers the shortest browse through the average bookstore or library, how do we find cyberspace works of literature? As more reputable and remarkable literary web magazines are created and accepted by the literati, and more cyberartists' websites offer links like friends sharing good books, the search becomes easier. In that spirit, here is a cross-section of e-literature diversity to jumpstart your own cyberlit road trip:

- *An annotated link list of select e-literary journals*
- *A link list of cyberliterature—past and present*
- *An annotated list of select cyberlit*

### ***Electronic literary journals/websites***

From simple "print"-style literary magazines to cutting-edge showcases for the latest in digital derring-do, more cyberliterary journals are going "on-line" each year. They may have a relaxed "print" schedule; they may go on "hiatus" unexpectedly, leaving only their archives available or they may conduct business much like a print publication, but their individual literary visions encompass cyberspace's ever-evolving literary aesthetics.

Some offer only flash poetry:

[PoemsThatGo](#)

Some offer only traditional "print" poetry, both current and overlooked classics:

[Octopus](#)

Some defy description:

[Exquisite Corpse](#)

[WebDeISol](#)

Some believe strongly in archival missions:

[UbuWeb](#)

[ALT-X Virtual Imprints](#)

[Electronic Poetry Center](#)

Some offer e-chapbooks and e-novellas:

[Slope, novella](#)

[Slope, chapbook](#)

Some offer a cross section of cyberlit and hypermedia/new media wonders:

Drunken Boat  
Hubris  
GumballPoetry  
IowaReviewWeb  
Blue Moon Review  
3rd bed

(For an annotated bibliography of other literary web sources, courtesy of University of New Orleans, click [here](#).)

(For an archive of electronic creative works, past and present, explore the [Electronic Literature Directory](#).)

### ***Cyberliterature Cross-section***

Here are 30 examples of the medium's literary possibilities, from simple accessibility to digital marvels, from esoteric to whimsical, from classic hyperlit to digital fiction, from visual poetry to hypermedia/new media pieces. Some defy "genre-fication" in that blurring of genres that has begun to happen in this new medium; hence the "cross-genre section. (When in doubt, click.)

*Cyberfiction* (Some require Flash)

Floppy Disk  
Lasting Image  
The Girl and The Wolf  
Charmin' Cleary  
Storytime at 3 a.m.  
Water Always Writes In Plural  
253

*Cyberpoetry* (Some require Flash)

The Sky Poems-Vniverse  
Where Do Thoughts Go  
Last Day Of Betty Nkomo  
Xylo  
Dreamlife of Letters  
Dancing Rhinoceri of Bangladesh  
Chances-Haiku Flash  
A Study in Shades  
Stops And Rebels  
Eye Music (click on ASL Poetry/Deaf Culture; click on Ella Mae Lentz)

*Hyper/Cyber classic fiction/poetry* (Requires Flash)

Borges' [The Intruder](#)  
Yeats' [Mermaid](#)  
William Carlos Williams' [The Great Figure](#)

*Cross genre/hypermedia/new media creations* (Most require Flash or similar software)

[The ABC Book of North American Extinctions](#)  
[Animpoema/Animpoem](#)  
[The Space Behind The Ridge](#)  
[The Rut](#)  
[Jabberwocky Engine](#)  
[\(Go\) Fish](#)  
[Captions from the Secret Book of Lost Cartoons](#)  
[Three Proposals for Bottle Imps](#)  
[Pax](#)

*Hypertextual literature classics*

[Eastgate Reading Room](#)  
[UbuWeb Contemporary](#)  
[Electronic Literature Directory](#)

### ***Notes on Selected Cyberworks***

1) [The Girl and the Wolf, A Variable Tale](#) Nick Montfort  
"To read a continuation of the story, choose the amount of sex and violence you would prefer using the woodcut grid above..." A retelling of Little Red Riding Hood, this clever exploration of hypertextual interactivity creates a unique experiment dealing with the writerly reader's curiosity and self-awareness.

2) [The Intruder](#) Natalie Borchkin  
This bricolage retelling of Jorge Borges' classic story offers an unusual contemporary template for new interpretation and social commentary. The reader "plays" literary versions of classic computer games such as Pong and Jump—"experiencing" Borges' story in 10 games that escalate from playfulness to shock. Click here for [critique](#):

3) [The Last Day of Betty Nkomo](#) Young-Hae Chang  
A simple, but effective hypermedia piece. As *PoemsThatGo* explains: "Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries presents "Betty Nkomo" in their signature style: devoid of color, interactivity and graphics, leaving the audience with one rhythmically charged word on the screen at a time making what else? Poetry."

4) [The Dancing Rhinoceri of Bangladesh](#) Millie Niss  
An early interactive Flash poem—you create the poem by wandering while a voice speaks truths about the "process." It is "a combinatorial excursion into the textual possibilities of rhinoceri and other matters," the poet explains.

5) [Eye Music](#) Ella Mae Lentz

Visual poetry in the literal sense: Visualize the telephone wires along the road, the way they move by your eye as you ride by, sloping up and down, up and down. Now see Lentz's poem "Eye Music" in *Slope's* special American Sign Language Poetry Special Edition.

Click on ASL Poetry and Culture.

And again on Ella Mae Lentz: "Eye Music."

6) [A Study in Shades](#) Robert Kendall (also available on [BBC Online](#))

A simple piece, hypertextually, that explores the devastation of Alzheimer's Disease from the points of view of a man afflicted by it and his daughter. The reader interacts with the poem to experience the different perspectives of the two characters and their relationship to each other. An interplay between text and morphing graphics reflects the progress of this relationship.

7) [Where Do Thoughts Go?](#) David Koebel

A good example of the potential within flash poetry—this is three poems in one. Its interactive sound and sight create two interlocking poems. The writerly dynamic—toggle b/w sound and words—offers an interactivity that adds a third poem (or more) to the mix. The cyberpoet invites you to come experiment with the pauses, and conjured sights and sounds, to experience the poem in your own way. Short enough to stand up to replay after replay.

8) [Charmin' Cleary](#) Edward Falco

Early hypertextual, non-linear, no-definitive-ending, short story that still works. The believable cast of characters and good storytelling are the reason. The technology is behind the curtain but very much part of the experience, integral yet never showy. Falco describes the effort as an attempt to rein in hypertext to see "what tricks might be accomplished with a tighter hold." Click [here](#) for Author's notes.

9) [Floppy Disk](#) Digital Fiction

What might be on an old floppy disk found on the ground ? Even a non-linear voyeuristic short story based on "old" technology can be visually and intellectually stimulating. Notice the subtle "sound" effect adding to the "old" feel.

10) [Go Fish](#) Loss Pequeno Glazier

One look at this early cyberpoem seems like a triumph of design over poetics but when studied a little longer, hidden authorial and social meanings may come to mind along with the playful inventiveness (or not, but that might also be the point).

11) [Jabberwocky Engine](#) Neil Hennessey

Is the "Jabberwocky Engine" a poem? Syntactical theory? Rhetorical roulette? Once turned on, the "Engine" circulates letters to produce nonsensical words that sound like English words, in the same spirit as the "words" in Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky." As the site explains, "Hennessey realizes a linguistic chemistry with letters as atoms and words

as molecules."

12) [Stops And Rebels: a critique of hypertext](#) Brian Kim Stefans

Stefans give his own hypertext "computer poem—and hypertext in general—an on-screen hypertextual critique. Also the creator of "The DreamLife of Letters" (see above), one of the earliest hypermedia poetic efforts complete with critique.

13) [3 Proposals For Bottle Imps](#) William Poundstone

From *Iowa Review Web* intro: "William Poundstone's ground-breaking New Media piece is loosely inspired by the story-telling automata in Raymond Roussel's novel *Locus Solus*. Be sure to read the FAQ section. Poundstone makes this obscure allusion less so—and he connects Roussel's narrative devices to contemporary issues of electronic literature."

14) [253](#) Geoff Ryman

An early hypertext novel which takes place on a broken-down tube train in London. Links move through the train into each passenger's thoughts, jump to the sensational ending, back and forth even to the advertisements on the train, interconnecting in a non-chronological way, not without authorial, tongue-in-cheek comment. Often cited as a highly accessible "hyperbook" where the links, much like a hyper-train of thoughts and actions, are all connected, serving a real purpose in the narrative.

15) [Pax](#) Stuart Moulthrop

Hypertext pioneer Michael Joyce once said. "In this the adolescence of our technological age, it is hard to go too far." Or so Stuart Moulthrop quotes him, as Moulthrop pushes as far as he can, inventing something he calls "instrumental text" in this "middle space between interactive hypertext fiction and games." Not a work of literature in the ordinary sense; nor a game, but meant to be played as well as read. "Whether this text is hyper, cyber, techno, or oulipo, indeed whether it is "text" at all," says Moulthrop, "leave to those who care about such matters."

## ***Does cyberlit turn writers into programmers?***

Technology drives cyberlit. That is a given.

But, by its very nature, technology is always changing . And while new technology is the force which drives cyberliterature, it can also be its Achilles heel. Writing is an extremely cheap art-form to practice, the basic requirements being pen and paper. What, though, are the basic requirements for cyberliterature? A computer with an internet connection, special software, a website with domain-name registration, an understanding of website design, and HTML or XHTML, at the very least, perhaps a digital camera as well as an image-processing package, and often much more. "Authors of hyperliterature don't have to be computer programmers," states Edward Picot in his *Slope* essay, [Hyperliterature: Apotheosis of Self-Publishing?](#), "but they certainly do have to know a good deal more than how to set pen to paper."

Cyberwriters, like all writers, face the challenge of making the words do what they envisage, but they also face the challenge of its technology. In other words, the hypermedia poet or fiction writer who's also his/her own designer faces double-duty. "I don't want to exaggerate this aspect of hyperliterature, because it is my personal belief that original and exciting work can still be produced using nothing more than HTML," continues Picot, "but equally it must be admitted that some of the most striking recent works in the field must have taken a lot of technical know-how to produce."

A cyberwriter walks a fine line between "the desire for impressive graphic effects and the need to keep download times to a minimum to preserve reader engagement," states Carrie McMillan in her article [Hypertext HyperHype](#). "There is a real danger that writers of hyperliterature may begin to concentrate on the hyper at the expense of the literature," she adds. "They may become so involved with the technology that they become uninteresting as writers, or they may allow a desire to enthrall and astonish their audience to get the better of their concern to say anything original and deeply-felt."

In fact, that dynamic is exactly what inspired Robert Coover, who famously heralded the [beginning](#) of the hypertext era, announce less than a decade later that its golden age was [over](#) . The web, he declared "has not been very hospitable" to serious hyperfiction but has rather supported superficial, opportunistic events:

It tends to be a noisy, restless, opportunistic, superficial, e-commerce-driven, chaotic realm, dominated by hacks, pitchmen, and pretenders, in which the quiet voice of literature cannot easily be heard or, if heard by chance, attended to for more than a moment or two. Literature is meditative

and the Net is riven by ceaseless hype and chatter. Literature has a shape, and the Net is shapeless.

The initial "hype" about hypertext literature was centered solely on its non-linearity, ignoring its other possible dimensions, such as the multimedia aspect of [hypertext](#). What does Coover think of hypermedia? "Hypertext is now used more to access hypermedia...that most passive and imperious of forms," he states, adding that hypermedia's constant threat is to "suck the substance out of a work of lettered art, reduce it to surface spectacle." Or put more succinctly, "it's back to the movies again."

But Jeff Rice in his creative hypertexted response to both of Coover's articles disagrees:

How can the "Golden Age" be over before we have begun to incorporate hypertext completely into our daily reading and writing habits? What we do today can hardly be called a beginning. Our current relationship to hypertext is comparable to the first months of television - static, no programming, and a few sets tuned in... The speed of technological innovation has convinced us that six years ago was sixty years ago, that ten years ago was a century past.

(For the entire hypertexted *Kairos* critique of Coover's articles, click [here](#) )

But when literature goes multimedia, when hypertext turns into hypermedia—or new media, as it is being called in the ever-expanding field—does a shift take place from serious aesthetics to superficial entertainment? That's the debate. In an article entitled [When Literature Goes Multimedia](#), Roberto Simanowski, reflects on this tension: "If the risk of hyperfiction is to link without meaning, the risk of hypermedia is to employ effects that only flex the technical muscles. It's not enough to have nice images or fancy animation. Effects are only justified insofar as they convey a message. "

That said, if writers interested in cyberlit in all its amazing diversity and potential want neither to be programmers nor designers, what is the answer? Collaboration? Technology may drive it to be so, says [Picot](#).

It may simply be the case that the technology involved in hyperliterature will become too complicated for individual writers to cope with, with the result that the hypertexts of the future will be team efforts rather than individual ones—either teams of writers working together, or individual writers working with technical experts...."

The skills "required to produce exciting work that might gain a large audience on the net may become unreachable to all but the lucky or technically dedicated," predicts Digital Fiction's Andy Campbell , and even those who might want to do it all, may not be able to.

"Collaborations between graphic designers, programmers and writers are already spreading; although there are overlaps, everyone is being strictly pushed back to their own [specialty](#)." In fact, current literary e-journals exist that invite collaborative submissions, celebrating cross-genre works. Of course, any collaboration is not without its own danger. If the hypertexts of the future can only be produced by teams of people, worries McMillan, they may become almost impossible to bring out on an independent and self-financed [basis](#).

Is this the end of hypertext's golden era or just the beginning? Keeping it simple or hazarding the complexities of collaboration—which will it be? The answer may be "both." Future cyberwriters will become not programmers but designers of their own visions either by reveling in simplicity or the experimentation complexities of collaboration, embracing future technology as a new century's tools for creative expression.

Marshall McLuhan believed that content follows form, calling media "[the extensions of man](#)." That certainly seems true with writing in cyberspace. The "insurgent" technologies will "give rise to new structures of feeling and thought, new manners of perception."

And those new perceptions must, naturally, take into account the "other" language, the language of the computer that allows a writer's vision to come to cyber-life. In considering his experimentations with a new software—the "'neath text," as he calls it—cyberpoet Jim Andrews offers philosophical thoughts about the uneasy relationship between the very human feeling of poetry, the ghostly creative muse, and the mechanical feeling of creating poetry via computer:

It is apparently ironic that we use machines to convey our humanity, but the irony is only apparent when we acknowledge the ghost in the machine and acknowledge also that we made the machine for the ghost to travel in...The "'neath text" is to some forbiddingly technical and automated. Yet the ghostie may appreciate it, the ghostie neath and above and around the '[neath text](#)'.

## ***What are cyberlit's advantages?***

### *Linkage, Interactivity/Non-Linear Narrative*

The linkage dynamic that hypertext gives to cyberspace is, of course, its definitive literary advantage. As critic Carrie McMillan put it, "Those who sing the praises of hypertext fiction/electronic poetry and prose, whatever you may wish to call it often cite above all the possibilities it offers the writer for non-linear narratives, a break away from traditional story structures into a new [realm](#)..."

Traditional linear narrative found in the time-honored book format may hold the reader's attention over all other structures, but for the computer screen, the hypertextual format offers a much more natural and appealing way for a reader to read a story, any story, since it avoids tedious text-scrolling. It also gives far more latitude to the writer. Beginnings, endings and chronological order are not the inevitabilities they are in book format, flashbacks and parallel storylines are more natural, and even backward and sideways movement is [possible](#).

Also, hypertextual writing mimics the way our minds work, presenting choices and ideas with every click. Cybernarratives can become a multi-layered world of non-chronological events, as [McMillan](#) points out, such as the interactive game-like computer narrative fiction, [Dark Lethe](#), where readers contribute their own writing to the make-believe world. Or the cyberwork can be a "literary introspective meandering with a stream of consciousness feel, often about the act of writing itself, as seen in a work such as [Water Always Writes in Plural](#)."

But perhaps its best advantage is that is more like real life: "Linear narratives are poor at showing the kind of existence where people just muddle along from one situation to another, without getting anywhere in particular or learning any valuable lessons," explains Edward Picot. "They perpetuate a myth of personal progress—the idea that life is leading us somewhere, even if it's to tragedy. And because they oblige their writers to simplify the stories they tell for the sake of forward momentum, they also perpetuate a myth of [reality](#)."

Hypertextual writing also forces us to be more poetic in our understanding of the form itself. "With hypertext we focus, both as writers and as readers, on structure as much as on prose," Robert Coover points out, "for we are made aware suddenly of the shapes of narratives that are often hidden in print stories... We are always astonished to discover how much of the reading and writing experience occurs in the interstices and trajectories between text fragments. The text fragments are like stepping stones, there for our safety, but the real current of the narratives runs between [them](#)."

Cyberspace's writerly advantages, though, go much farther than its creative hyperlink potential.

### *Accessibility-Process/Revision*

A web-published piece unlike a print piece is always and forever revisable. A cyberpoem or cyberfiction is finished at its "published" point, allowing it to do all the things that a published print piece should—stand on its own, be of its time period, and ultimately stand the test of time. But the unequivocal finality of a print author's creation is not necessarily true for the cybercreator. Just because it has been "published" to the web, doesn't mean it's forever final. Being "published" takes on a acutely different meaning in the creative universe that is cyberspace.

Case in point: "Headed South," a memoir project was published in *Kairos* in 1998. In a print journal, whatever version of a piece is published in a 1998 print journal edition would be the one forever in that edition. But online, links change all that. First, the "piece" of an e-literary magazine is often not physically at the e-journal's location (server). It has linked, naturally enough, to the piece wherever it resides, and therefore sends the reader "there." So, a researcher stumbling upon the 1998 *Kairos* edition's publication of [Headed South](#), might see a 1998-1999 copyright but find a work updated in 2003. Its author can continue to update her website, presentation, even her memoir, and yet it will continue to be linked to the original edition where it first saw "print."

That may seem highly unusual for a creative piece, yet its an obvious advantage for the cyberwriter (or a temptation for the obsessive/compulsive one). Unless an effort is made to duplicate the original, no other version but the present one exists—the version online is always the eternal original.

### *Accessibility to Process*

Cyberwriters often seems compelled to add a link to their creations offering a discussion on theory and process, no doubt due to the newness of the medium and its wide-open linkage power freedom endemic in the form. For the inquisitive and the beginner, this offers unprecedented, immediate access, unparalleled in centuries of print literature. He/she only has to explore the creative sites or their author's websites to find "essays," "author's notes, or "about" links instantly available. Here are three examples:

- Jim Andrews website [vispo.com](#). (Even his poetry game, "arteroids" offers a process essay.)
- Stephanie Strickland's work [SkyPoems-Vniverse](#).
- Edward Falco's [Charmin' Cleary](#)

### *Hypermedia Diversity*

The breadth and diversity of cyberlit's advantages are best shown by example:

- Hypertext creations can make powerful visual statements that print cannot, as in: [The ABC Book of North American Extinctions](#)

- Hypertextual writing can create unique interactions that examine the writerly reader's curiosity:

[The Girl and The Wolf](#) (requires Flash)

- Some cyberpoetry can seem to be a response to Eastgate founder Mark Bernstein's admonition to be *whimsical*, but like "moving" *concrete poetry*, it can also force us to look at words and letters detached from their usual meaning.

[\(Go\) Fish](#)

[Animpoema/Animpoem](#) (requires Flash)

### *WWW Worldwide Exposure*

Electronic publisher [Coach House Press](#) explains succinctly a few of the remarkable advantages of the medium:

The internet allows millions of people around the world to access our site, and read authors whose printed books might never be sold in their local bookstores. Publishing online also offers multimedia and other features (like full colour images) that would be too costly to produce physically, if they are possible at all. Another clear advantage for readers is the ability to search a full text—or a full library—in seconds.

### *Collaborative Possibilities*

The most promising advantage is one that entails all the above. Cyberspace is a multi-level creative medium with potential, literally, as far as the cyber-eye can see, constantly surfacing with new names and new surprises. The future may see writers, computer experts and visual designers working together on hypertext projects in the way that teams collaborate on TV programs and feature films. (See [Does cyberlit turn writers into programmers?](#))

### *Wave of Future*

A product of a creative medium still in its infancy, hypertextual writing reinvents itself every few years, inspiring recurring echoes of it "being dead," (See [What are cyberlit's disadvantages?](#)) There will be creative writers who embrace the "new" in order to renew it. Since the 21st century shows no promise of "unplugging," it's safe to say the "new" advantages of cyberliterature will only grow along with the medium's technology, ever complementing, more than competing, with the universe of print literature for the tech-savvy creative writer's attention.

## *What are cyberlit's disadvantages?*

i hates cyberpoetry  
and i can't hates no more  
—A poet

### *Resistance*

Creative hypertextual writing has been pronounced dead several times, as early as 1993 and on into the 21st century:

- (1) ["Is Interactive Dead?"](#)
- (2) [Literary Hypertext: The Passing of the Golden Age](#)
- (3) [Cybertext Killed the Hypertext Star](#)

One has to wonder, why the resistance? An early critic of the form said, "Storytelling and narrative lie at the heart of all successful communication. Crude, explicit, button-pushing interaction breaks the spell of engagement and makes it hard to present complex information that unfolds in careful [sequence](#)."

Another quipped: "We're still left to ask 'Now what?' when all the clicking is [done](#)."

Another bemoaned: "It neglects to consider the very real pleasures that come from surrendering to the discursive seductions of a masterful [author](#)."

"Even those of us who hold a valid academic interest in reading and writing about these works often grumble about the lack of pleasure associated with 'reading' them," said yet [another](#).

Some cite the download and upload times involved as problematic. Hypermedia creators themselves have such moments, as we can see in this South Korean writer's piece about waiting on his website to upload (while at the same time creating a cyberlit way of expressing it): [Artist's Statement No. 45,730,944: The Perfect Artistic Website](#) (Requires Flash)

### *Respect*

Even as the medium itself explodes into everyday life, cyberlit respect among the print-focused literati has been slow in coming. For instance, a symposium on the conceptual issues surrounding hypertext—initiated by a leading cyberpoet—was published in [American Letters & Commentary #12](#)

Note that the online link is nothing more than a table of contents, the actual issue only available via subscription, offered at a special price for web subscribers who print out the

page and send it via snail mail with a check. (The term [Luddite](#) springs to mind.)

### *Free mentality*

The perception persists in some circles that anything free—i.e., available online—cannot be high quality. Yet the nature of the internet fosters "free" mindset, as seen in the recent music industry's download controversy. Put another way, accessibility is cyberliterature's very existence. It must be seen to be wanted, but if seen in cyberspace, then in a very real way, it's already owned.

Literary emagazines have become creative in their attempts to make their efforts, if not self-supporting, at least commercially viable. *Drunken Boat*, for instance, asks for a donation of \$2 (at this writing) before entering its site, which includes new poetry, prose, photography, video, web art, and cybertext as well as notable audio interviews with such literary giants as Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award Winner Norman Mailer.

Others such as Coach House Books are more direct:

Are the online books free? Not exactly. You are asked to "tip the author"—that is, give them a small royalty for reading their works online. Authors deserve to be paid for their work...If you're a regular visitor to this site, and you haven't tipped any of our authors yet (you cheap bastard), please consider doing so.

[Coach House](#) long championed the shareware "try before you buy" paradigm, but that is changing:

Due to the massive influx of new users on the Internet in recent years, the spirit of goodwill and fair usage that inspired the shareware ethic has been trampled under the virtual feet of a public greedy for new forms of cheap (read "free") entertainment...We believe that the extra work and risk involved in embarking on an entirely new form of publication demands extra compensation...and we are working to find new avenues.

### *Elitist readership /Experimental persona*

"Where are the hypertexts?" and "Where are the readers of hypertexts?" asked Eastgate e-publisher Mark Bernstein. (8) Early hypertext fiction seemed to be written for and read by an extremely specialized audience, one steeped in postmodern and poststructuralist literary theory. So much so, that Bernstein speaking to a new generation of cyberauthors suggested they create hypertexts that include "elements of mystery, fun, satire, and even "inspired silliness." One professor, Lawrence James Clark notes student problems with

hyperlit's complicated narrative structures "full of endless loops." He believes three major hindrances to a novice readers' enjoyment of hypertext fiction—"the (apparent) lack of closure, frustration with non-linear narrative, and navigational issues."

"How do I know when I've read everything?" is the usual wail of the frustrated hypertext reader, according to Clark. Too often with hyperliterature, when the text starts to loop relentlessly, that is the only sign there's no more to read, and that can be obviously less satisfying than a good print ending. But in the hands of a skillful, creative cyberauthor, it doesn't have to be that way. As writer Robert Kendall put it, "The effectiveness of just about any artwork depends partly upon the successful integration of form and content, and hypertext is no exception. In fact, if a work's hypertextuality isn't an integral part of its conception, it may seem at best just mere decoration and at worst an extraneous annoyance."

### *Technology*

Technology itself can be a disadvantage. There's the cost, of course. Even the novice cyberwriter must have a computer with an internet connection, additional software, maybe a digital camera, an image-processing package, and certainly his/her own websites with its domain-name registration et al. That's not even mentioning the amount of technical expertise involved.

But the ever-involving form itself can be a problem. Book print form has been the same for hundreds of years. To create tech-centered art of any kind, and to keep it valid and constantly current is a brave undertaking—at least, so it seems. Working with a technological medium is always living dangerously, and always has been. Robert Coover acknowledged as much in 1992 at the dawn of cyberliterature. "Even though the basic technology of hypertext may be with us for centuries to come, perhaps even as long as the technology of the book," he admits, "its hardware and software seem to be fragile and short-lived," he admits. "Whole new generations of equipment and programs arrive before we can finish reading the instructions of the old." Jay David Bolter has called the feeling "the anxiety of obsolescence." (9)

Artistically, other aspects of technology can make life in cyberart difficult as well—"its extremely brief lifetime, its lack of backward compatibility, its lack of compatibility with rival technologies," are only three posed by cyberpoet [Stephanie Strickland](#).

And there are always the latest "bugs" and "errors" to deal with in any computer complexity, so common to the computer world that sometimes the only thing to do is make art about it, as this hypermedia poet/artist did: [RunTimeError \(requires flash\)](#):

Cyberpoet [Reiner Strasser](#) called the electronic media a "time-eater." There is "always the danger to virtualize" that is, to "lose contact to your real world."

Technology also creates an unplanned obsolescence factor. A reader who wants to read *Don Quixote*, for instance, written over 500 years ago, has only to stroll into any library

or bookstore for a dozen different translations. But while lists and critiques of [early hyperlit works](#) are still accessible online, the works themselves are sometimes oddly inaccessible via cyberspace, even though sites such as [Electronic Literary Directory](#) attempt to remedy that problem.

Granted, copyright law demands often keep important print publications from public domain for at least 50 years, and that dynamic may impact some cyber-published works as well, but what book, due to technological advancements is not still readily available? Two classic hypertext fictions, for instance, are Michael Joyce's [Afternoon: A Story](#) and Shelley Jackson's [Patchwork Girl](#).

One has been called "an information age *Odyssey*" the other, "a true paradigmatic work of the era." Both can still be bought through Eastgate ([www.eastgate.com](http://www.eastgate.com)) but neither, not even excerpts at this writing, are offered online. Missing is the satisfaction of flipping through a piece of literature before buying. And if a reader bought it now, sight unseen, would it be "readable" on his/her present computers, over a technological decade hence? Even if one believes in "literary Darwinism," i.e. quality literature standing the test of time, will the concept be true for hypertext work? As Robert Kendall put it in [Hypertexts of Yesteryear](#), consider the poor publisher who, before considering whether to resurrect a discontinued text has to also consider the trouble of "hunting down an obsolete machine or hiring an engineer to decipher an obsolete file format just to get an idea whether the piece is worth reissuing."

### *Freedom's flipside*

The much-heralded freedom of the internet has its downsides. As PoetryX's Jough Dempsey explains: "Unfortunately...since anyone can self-publish anything they want, most people do. The amount of inaccuracies, errors, and outright misinformation available on the Internet is staggering. Never before in the history of humanity has so much incorrect information been so freely and readily available."<sup>(10)</sup>

Dead links, mis-info, and typos are epidemic in a wide-open, librarian-free archival space as big as cyberspace. [ERROR](#)

Websites are abandoned, out-of-date and adrift in cyberspace with no warning for the unknowing browser. Even "live" sites which don't check their links periodically can have dead links. As [Coach House Books](#) warns, "Be aware that pages have a tendency to move, so check your links occasionally to make sure they're still good."

Links can also be better off dead. In the strange domain-name world of the internet, an innocent click of abandoned link can shock. One prominent university untended literary website links to a defunct literary journal URL that is now a porn site (a link that will go [linkless](#) in this text for obvious reasons.)

As for typos, no one truly wants cyberspace to have a gatekeeper, but an proofreader would be helpful. Amateur, professional, even pedagogical and scholarly texts are replete

with an astonishing amount of typos, which underscores the old notion that everyone needs an editor. One reliable, oft-cited cybertheory site refers in several places to Marshall McLuhan's *Medium is the Message* [sic], for example.

Reason? A "shallow" cyberspace "author" responsibility is shallow? A subconscious lack of respect for print strictness? The nature of cyber "space"—its mutability, immediacy, virtuality, and even its correctability? Or is it as one web designer said, "Who has time to wait for a snail-paced copyeditor?" Print-text publishing has time-honed layers of editorial fail-safes to keep errors and typos at bay. And still they happen. What hope for the internet with its one-click publishing? Adding "editor" to the cyberwriter's tasks along with "programmer/designer" creates triple-duty. Yet, the irony remains: Of all mediums, exactness in HTML is demanded for hyperspace to work at all. A mistyping of even a letter in a URL—can detour or even dead-end a link and leave the reader stranded in cyberspace, as Loss Pequeno Glazier demonstrates: *faulty text*

### *Despite All*

Despite the disadvantages—and even inspired by their challenges—artists continue to push into cyberspace's creative territory with obvious glee, especially with the mass accessibility offered by the latest hypermedia/new media viewing technology now being standard on most 21st century computers. The virtually visceral future of the creative medium seems to not only attract but invigorate the adventurous writers' imaginations. Some might even call that the definition of creativity—taking the old and making it new in surprising and difficult ways. The real allure of hypertextual-based literature may well be, just as in print text, the "ever more ingenious ways of directing, controlling and surprising the *reader*."

## *Is a cyberlit aesthetic emerging?*

Considering the ever-mutable nature of this still-new creative medium, the fact that a cyberlit aesthetic is forming and reforming should be no surprise. As critic Carrie McMillan expresses it, writers are a more "introspective bunch," in general and those working in hypertext writing are always questioning the potential and value of the medium:

"This constant discussion of the hypertext format for writing seems to want to bash out a set of conventions for this genre, which is still so new and fresh that there is no real agreement even as to what name it should be known as, never mind what it's characterised by. And it is in this freshness that I think the real **potential lies.**"

What exactly makes a work artistic or literary is, of course, open to interpretation and question. Neil Randall's definition of literariness, in the context of interactive fiction, is nicely revealing for all cyberlit: "**a merging of the strange and the familiar.**"

"Strange and familiar" certainly applies to cyberspace and literature created for the medium. Patterns are emerging, however. For instance, by the very nature of the computer screen "space," cyberfiction and poetry favor the short form. A hypertext poems tends to be offered quite differently from prose pieces. The longer the narrative, "the more it seems to call for straightforward reading without much distraction...the shorter a text, the more thoroughly it can be animated and decorated in a comparatively short space of **time.**"

Lawrence James Clark, in a 1999 essay extolling a lighter aesthetic in hyperfiction, saw a decidedly postmodern slant he considered negative. "Since much of it has been written by authors steeped in postmodern and poststructuralist literary theory, hypertext fiction has attempted to manifest these theories in the structure and content of the **"works."**

What about cyberpoetry? How is its aesthetics forming in a visual, virtual world? As a column in *PoemsThatGo* asks: "What happens when we take the words out of the poem and the letters out of the words and play with their relation to the page? What happens when the visual form of the poem is as important as the words that **make it?**"

Cyberpoet Robert Kendall notes dramatically contrasting cyberpoetic aesthetics:

You have people like John Cayley whose work depends heavily upon randomization or quasi-randomization in the tradition of John Cage and Jackson Mac Low. There's a strong emphasis on theoretical underpinnings here.. .the poetry is generally unadorned by nontextual elements. At the other end of the spectrum is much of the new poetry on sites like Poems That Go. Audio and

video are placed on equal footing with text, or often dominate the text, and there's an emphasis on accessibility in the manner of street poetry or East Village performance poetry. Then there's everything in between and around these approaches.

"The page has become complicated; the computer screen is refreshingly simple," states [Brian Kim Stefans](#). Hence much cyberpoetry, like much rock and roll and neo-Lettrism, is puerile, or more justly, juvenile, against which we don't argue so much as regret at times." But even Stefans believes there should be an irreverence given to the omnipresent link itself. "The rejection of the page is not a leap at facility, though the leap-in-itself creates much needed pleasure, and is the primary activity of cyberpoets today. On the contrary, it imposes a much severer strain upon the language, since it is taking the projective and the performative at its word, while fishing lustily for the integrity of the lyrical corpus (tensegrity)."

In other words? "No hyperlink is free for the man who wants to do a good job." He offers a "creative" link example:

[Walt Disney](#)

This appears on the page as the following:

Walt Disney

The more interesting hyperlink would, then, be:

<http://www.idontparticularlycare.com>">Walt Disney

which would appear on the page as the following:

[Walt Disney](#)

Stefans reminds the cyberwriter never to forget that there are two languages going on in cyberspace. "There are two lines for every line of cyberpoetry—the line on the screen and the line in the source—not all lines of cyberpoetry can provide the effect of its promise, or premise, should its on-line double fail to live up."

In effect, the cyberwriter is learning a new language, one which each new leap in technology works to make ever simpler yet ever more visually fascinating. Any aesthetic demands a working awareness of [HTML](#), this "neath text." For a peek behind the screen, choose "View Document Source" from most any cyberspace screen document from the "View" menu. Such as this simple [HypertextHaiku](#).

What might that look like if "Flash" technology is added?

Click here for [FlashHaiku: Chances](#)(requires Flash)

Click here for [Computergeek Haiku](#)

Cyberpoet Robert Kendall expresses well the most basic cyberlit aesthetic: "The hallmark of worthwhile hypertext that everyone is likely to agree upon is that it offers a reading experience fundamentally different from reading print. Hypertextuality should

not be mere decoration that could be easily stripped away to reveal a would-be piece of printed linear text [beneath](#)."

Can a writer dabble in both print lit and cyberlit? Working in both print and hypertext can be good for a writer, says Kendall. "For one thing, it can help ensure that when one turns to hypertext, the result will be truly hypertextual to the core. If a work emerges as basically linear in nature, it will end up in print rather than as an electronic piece in which the hypertext is merely window [dressing](#)."

Referring to select works that have been published in both print and cyberspace, he comments, "Clearly print works and hypertexts can coexist harmoniously in an author's oeuvre... Much is lost in these printed versions, which only hint at the hypertext reading [experience](#)."

Meanwhile, the medium's nature is inviting new subgenres into the discussion. When asked about aesthetics, cyberpoet [Stephanie Strickland](#), commented: "Many, many aesthetics are emerging. One central rivalry at the moment is between works that are more narrative and those that are more game-like."

Writer/designers coming from the game-playing world, who think of the computer as their creative playing field instead of cyberspace's entirety, are bringing their own aesthetics to the literary field. Nick Montfort, one of these pioneers, offers [theory and history](#) on this subgenre, known by several names including interactive fiction, computer narrative and digital fiction, as it begins to offer works with literary and artistic merit. The subgenre includes mass-market cyberfiction "collaborative game-playing worlds" of fiction as [Dark Lethe](#) to more literary creations such as found on [Digital Fiction](#).

Cyberliterature's aesthetic will obviously continue to move along with ever-evolving technology as well. In experimenting with new technology on his website, cyber poet/artist [Jim Andrews](#) ruminates on technology's potential to create aesthetics that may prove truly cyber-unique. "The great British poet W.H. Auden once said that he would give less chance of success to a young writer who said he had something to say than he would to a writer who said that he liked to watch the way words hang around together," he says. New technologies will allow writers to make documents "in which words hang around together and interact with each other and with the reader and possibly with other documents and readers on the Web in ways that can be relevant to what Auden said but in radically different ways than he had in [mind](#)."

#### SOME LINKS:

[Currents in Electronic Literacy](#)

[WebMonkey](#)

[StorySpace](#)

[Electronic Labyrinth](#)

[Word Circuits](#)

[Hyperkitchen](#)

[Electronic Literary Directory](#)

## *How to publish cyberliterature?*

Publishing in cyberspace is easy, and it's hard—easy to hit the publish button, hard to be "discovered." Even the meaning of the word "publish" holds a different connotation for cyberspace. Every internet-connected desktop publishing application offers to "publish" a work by choosing the word from a menu and launching it into cyberspace, and that self-publishing dynamic is what has given the cyberlit medium its disreputable "aura" since its inception. As theorist Amanda Griscom describes it, "This literary renaissance in which the masses can distribute their information without having to be chosen or favored by the powers that be is theoretically appealing, but it can be utterly overwhelming to try to [navigate](#)."

It's as if someone has placed the library and bookstore in the middle of the highway and is herding every last diary, gossip, phone chat, and back alley banter through it. Words are everywhere, but which ones to read? And that, Griscom would say, begs the question for the cyberwriter: "Does a literary work on a website in cyberspace exist if no one visits it?"

In the "print" sense of the word, being published means gaining recognition for your work in some broad, communally accepted way dealing with audience. Oddly enough, the answer for quality cyber-publication is the same one it has always been, the old "print" way with a twist. Links, appropriately enough, are the cyberspace equivalent of a publishing future, and the most desired links are to widely-visited sites and online journals who take submissions in the same way that print journals do. In other words, after a work is created from within a writer's website and server, the writer then "Net"works, literally and figuratively. And one of the best ways is the time-honored way of submitting work to like-minded online publications and contests.

Why? Readers must rely on some authority to separate the wheat from the chaff, as it were, just as it has always been, Griscom points out. Search engines, as good as they are, still do not a literary community make. Griscom quotes internet expert and MIT professor [Randall Davis](#) on the topic:

There remains still a necessity for editing, for putting faith in a credible source, and I think we are already beginning to see the same sorts of structures build up in the Internet world which are, in effect, critics and people who can vouch for or against the various information sources...anyone with a laser printer or an ink jet printer can pass out their leaflets on street corners, but why do millions of people read Time magazine and only an handful of people read those leaflets?

In his *Slope* article "[Hyperliterature: The Apotheosis of Self-Publishing](#)," Edward Picot suggests that, in theory, the old problem of a creative work's distribution is solved via cyberspace. Writers with their own websites can display their work around the globe, and the internet's email offers free publicity via email and web boards. But then he admits the best way to bring new work to the attention of a wider public is still through the literary ejournals/emagazines, many of which now boast substantial reputations and readerships. As he explains:

The good thing about e-zines from the public's point of view is that they are edited, which means that readers can feel confident the work in them will be up to a certain level, far above the level of vanity publishing. Writers who can consistently place their work in the more reputable e-zines will undoubtedly begin to build themselves reputations and followings, and readers can be expected to move on from the e-zines to the personal websites of the writers concerned.

(For a list of well-received and often remarkable electronic literary journals, see the list under (See [What about some site-seeing?](#)) )

And what is the state of "book" publishing in cyberspace? Four cyberpublishing leaders committed to bringing original electronic literature into cyberspace print are worthy of note—[Eastgate](#), [Alt-X](#), [Coach House Books](#), and [UBU Editions](#) Coach House Books, which publishes online as well as in print, expresses the mission eloquently:

We believe in "full" (rather than semi) publishing, and as such see electronic publishing not as a marketing gimmick but as a reality and a necessity. After all, publishing means to make public, and the internet has become an important public "space."

## *What's down the road?*

Where writing is, odds are cyberspace is in reach. And where there is writing, there will be literature, always and ever evolving. Cyberspace-connected computers are now unequivocally a part of the daily fabric of modern life. Robert Coover's words, written in 1992, are still true: "Hypertext is truly a new and unique environment. Artists who work there must be read there. And they will probably be judged there as well: criticism, like fiction, is moving off the page and on line, and it is itself susceptible to continuous changes of mind and text." We are at the beginning of this new medium for literary expression, the technology of cyberspace changing almost before our eyes. "Standard HTML pages with black text and blue links are already becoming the online equivalent of silent movies," notes Digital Fiction's Andy Campbell. "The internet will undoubtedly transform into a world somewhere between ["CD Roms and interactive television.](#)"

And what of predictions about cyberspace itself? The world wide web is, says Robert Kendall, "[Publishing's Awakening Giant,](#)" the title of his *Poets&Writers* article on the topic. The "most important development we've had in writing/publishing since Gutenberg," Alt-X's Mark America says of the web, and the development is moving faster all the time. "Predictions about the future size...speed, and function of the Internet are futile. The same goes for writing a book about today's digital medium. By the time the book gets copy-edited, typeset, printed, and shipped, the subject matter isn't so emerging anymore," quipped [Edward Picot.](#)

This then is the most dramatic difference between what was before and what will come after in the world of words. Print lit has remained essentially the same for hundreds of years, cyberlit will continue to morph along with each technological advance. So it will be when today's technologies are old and a future researcher stumbles upon this site only to judge its information out of date yet mildly of historical value. Meanwhile, [Marshall McLuhan's](#) "insurgent technologies" will continue to "give rise to new structures of feeling and thought, new manners of perception."

And the "consensual hallucination" that William Gibson called "cyberspace" will grow to be as common as the city library (and perhaps it already has). (1) Some, though, like [Campbell](#), will see this flooding sea of change as a challenge and create new visions to fit it:

As the increasing speed and popularity of broadband pumps more and more quality and versatility into full motion video on the web, Digital Fiction clings onto words and language in the hope of telling stories, 'exploring narratives', without completely becoming film. It's a vision that tries to discover the future for writers who do not wish to produce straightforward novels or scripts, but who want to hold on to the power and possibility of their own words and sentences, and whatever might manifest around them.

Will there be a change in the cyber-literary process itself, that is, its freedoms, its [copyright](#) issues, its mercantile dimension? No doubt. The works read and discussed here have been given over to the prevailing consensual cyberlit-mentality, that is their being offered via free access to the world-wide web or via an on-line publishing concern that conducts business in either the "free" model, or the "mercantile" model. However, many of the "free" publishing concerns are now experimenting with ways for readers to pay for the cyberlit experiences. It is all in flux; stay tuned; such is the technological age we live in.

What about cyberliterature itself? "The new media...are not toys," Marshall McLuhan once said; "they can be entrusted only to [new artists](#)."

With every generation more comfortable with the magic of this consensual hallucination and its creative potential, its literature will grow, even have its own literary geniuses, even perhaps its own satirists. As cyberpoet Brian Kim Stefans dreams: "We only need the coming of a Satirist—no one of genius is rare—to prove that the cyberpoem can have much the same edge that Dryden and Pope laid down."

For the rest of us, including all future cyberwriters, hypermedia poet David Knoebel offers this reminder and [challenge](#):

The English language includes more than 250,000 words.  
Good combinations are still available.

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### *Caveat*

In the words of Coach House Books: "Be aware that pages have a tendency to move."