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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

# 22

# Publishing Electronic Literature

*James O'Sullivan*

If publishing is the set of activities which achieves the dissemination of literature, then what can publishers offer work which can quite readily attend to its own dissemination? The creators of electronic literature often act as artist, producer, and distributor, removing the relationship between writer and publisher which has persisted since the earliest days of the literary market. Those who wish to find readers for their writing have long relied on publishers as "useful middlemen" (Bhaskar 2013: 1). Informed by my own experiences running a publishing house which publishes born-digital electronic literature,[1] this short chapter explores the extent to which electronic literature needs such middlemen, whether electronic literature has any need for publishers in the traditional sense. As just noted, why seek a publisher for something which publishes itself?

The practice of publishing is often unkind to itself, driven by a need to make literature happen but in a manner that can be economically sustained; a good publisher knows that good literature does not necessarily find good readers.[2] As Bhaskar so eloquently contends: "Publishing isn't like most industries. It busies itself with questions of intangible value and moral worth" (2013: 2). Publishers, then, often find themselves torn between the desire to turn a manuscript into a book, into something ready to seek an

[1]My definition of electronic literature has been detailed elsewhere (Heckman and O'Sullivan).
[2]Those interested in this problem from an Irish perspective might enjoy "The Realities of Independent Publishing in Ireland," published in the online edition of *The Irish Times* on June 9, 2017 (O'Sullivan).

audience, and the need to make a manuscript into a product, something which can survive capitalism as it seeks. As difficult as this might often seem, many publishers do find a way, utilitarian things are made of manuscripts, and readers are found.

The relationship between authors and readers has not always been facilitated by publishers. Charting the history of publishing in Britain, Feather reminds us of something which we tend to forget: "there was publishing before there were publishers" (2006: 3). The current state of e-lit publishing is perhaps the natural order restored, before writing as creative practice became writing as a commercial concern.[3] Some print authors still self-publish, and the digital economy has given rise to a whole range of platforms designed to empower writers taking this path. Services like Amazon's CreateSpace[4] have allowed authors to accomplish activities once the reserve of publishing houses. There are legitimate reasons for self-publishing, there are reasons why a talented author might have no alternative but to self-publish, and there are authors who must self-publish because their work will never be of sufficient quality to find a place under a reputable imprint. Whatever the reason for print literature being self-published, contemporary writing does stand out as other when shared without a publisher. We assume, rightly or wrongly, something about self-published literature because of the position which publishers have long held within the market.

Electronic literature has no such lineage, no historical frame from which a tension between publishing and self-publishing emanates. Publishers exist because writers are not necessarily producers, they are storytellers and artists, but their medium is language, and for language to find an audience it needs to face material realities dealt with by the practices of publishing. Publishers facilitate transactions between authors and readers, accounting for the many editorial, material, and economic matters embedded within the contemporary process of literary making. We can consider the act of publishing to entail three essential elements: production, distribution, and prestige. Such a troika can be problematized—particularly in the digital age—but this is publishing in the most fundamental sense, the selection, creation, and sharing of words deemed culturally, aesthetically, and economically worthy.

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[3]This is not a negative appraisal of publishers: whatever the role of publishing in the emergence of culture as industry, it is too late to separate the purity of expressive writing from the contemporary situation. All we can do at this point is keep faith that we will always have at least a few publishers who go about their business with the moral worth to which Bhaskar refers firmly instilled.

[4]I have, on a previous occasion, referred to the demand for content on Kindle and iTunes as a "dangerous axis of power" (Horgan 2017: 21).

My contention that there are no e-lit publishers is, of course, rhetorical.[5] Indeed, in the late-1980s and 1990s, Mark Bernstein's fabled Eastgate Systems, Inc., an ongoing concern based in Watertown, Massachusetts, published and sold works of electronic literature as packaged disks, becoming central to the emerging e-lit community. Eastgate maintains Storyspace, one of the first intuitive hypertext authoring systems to be adapted by authors for literary purposes.[6] Based on the success of titles like *afternoon: a story* (Joyce 1990) and *Victory Garden* (Moulthrop 1991), Eastgate became known as *the* publisher of electronic literature, drawing appreciation from articles published in popular venues like the *New York Times Book Review* (Coover 1993) and *Chicago Tribune* (Gutermann 1999) throughout the 1990s. Many critics now credit the Eastgate School with first bringing electronic literature into public consciousness. Whatever the contemporary situation, Bernstein's contributions to the e-lit community demonstrate that much of this form's first generation did rely on publishing houses: Eastgate invested in its writers, providing a means of production and distribution through which its carefully curated hypertextual stories could be brought to screens before downloading became a thing. It was figures like Michael Joyce and Stuart Moulthrop who had the aesthetic vision, but it was Eastgate, with Storyspace, with the finance that purchased and packaged the diskettes, with the network of distribution that brought it to e-lit's earliest readers, which saw that vision find an audience.

And then downloading, with the spread of the internet throughout domestic spheres, became the dominant form of cultural transmission, and everything changed.

Such change has one essential consequence in this context: "new authoring and distribution channels opened up" (Walker Rettberg 2012). Floppies were no longer needed to connect authors with readers, and it made little aesthetic sense for authors and publishers to persist in committing digital fictions to physical media. This shift brought about the rise of the Flash Moment and platform poetics wherein artists co-opt prevalent systems (Flores 2018), it brought about the present-day model of up-and-down distribution now considered standard. Electronic literature went from being shared as something bookish—a corporeal structure containing literary content—to

[5]For a comprehensive account of relevant publishing activities in Europe, see "Electronic literature publishing and distribution in Europe" (Eskelinen et al. 2014).

[6]While I am unaware of a comprehensive history of the Eastgate School, there are some sources from which readers interested in this particular aspect of e-lit's origin story might benefit (Barnet 2013: 131–2; Bernstein 2010; Walker Rettberg 2012). It is also important to acknowledge the contributions of Jay David Bolter and Michael Joyce to the emergence of e-lit authoring and publishing: while Storyspace is now maintained by Mark Bernstein's Eastgate, it was first developed by Bolter and Joyce back in 1987 (Bolter and Joyce 1987).

predominantly web-based content. Even contemporary works of electronic literature that are considered post-internet, operating on individual devices as local instances, are largely disseminated via web-based platforms like Steam.[7] Where once publishers were needed to make something of a digital fiction, present-day authors need only click "upload" and wait for readers to hit "download" in turn. We find evidence for this in the fleeting nature of Eastgate's ascendency as an e-lit publisher, coupled with a glaring absence of many successors. Multimodal authors are seemingly unconvinced of the need for publishers.

It is not just authors that need convincing. Every summer, the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) announces the recipient of the Coover Award, an annual prize which acknowledges the work of electronic literature considered by the scholarly body's judiciary panel to be the year's best. In August 2018, the prestigious accolade went to Will Luers, Hazel Smith, and Roger Dean for *novelling*, published by New Binary Press.[8] Despite being the Founding Editor of New Binary Press, I heard news of this achievement after it had become widespread on social media: the authors had been informed, whereas the press had not been contacted. The official announcement posted on the ELO's web page (eliterature.org) found space to acknowledge Bloomsbury for their part in publishing a volume which won the Hayles Award, the Coover prize's critical counterpart. This is not intended as a criticism of the ELO, but it is telling nonetheless: as a community, we *see* scholarly publishers, while we efface their creative counterparts. This is possibly a consequence of the ELO's status as an academic organization with a largely—though certainly not entirely—scholastic culture: publishers remain an active part of how we appraise scholarship, and so it would have been seen as more important to include the critical book's publisher in the announcement. The publisher of the creative work was seen as less noteworthy.

Furthermore, the achievement was not acknowledged by any of the state-funded bodies in Ireland tasked with the promotion of literature, despite quite explicit efforts on my part to achieve some small token of recognition, even a congratulatory tweet. Whether or not these bodies appreciate what it is that the e-lit movement is seeking to achieve with computational aesthetics, the reality of the situation is that this stuff is happening, and those agencies in receipt of public funding have a responsibility to support and amplify *all* literatures. This situation chimes with the wider situation in Europe, where e-lit tends to be isolated from the mainstream (Eskelinen

[7]Examples of such works would include *Dear Esther* (Pinchbeck 2017) and *All the Delicate Duplicates* (Breeze and Campbell 2017).

[8]It is "my" press in name to the extent that I am its Founding Editor, but it of course belongs to my collaborators, its authors, and readers.

et al. 2014: 235). Independent publishers who engage with the precarious economic conditions of their industry thrive on validation, and it would have been a small but meaningful gesture for some of these organizations to recognize the first ever Irish press to be involved in winning one of the major international awards for electronic literature. If such disregard continues, it will not simply be e-lit authors who question the need for publishers in this domain, but publishers themselves will ask, why bother?

Using New Binary Press as a case study is ideal in that I am positioned to articulate why it is that works like *novelling* may or may not require a publisher. Founded in 2012, New Binary Press publishes literature across a variety of media, including born-digital electronic literature. In fact, the press has been built on e-lit, with one of its first titles, Graham Allen's one-line-a-day *Holes* (Allen and O'Sullivan 2016; Karhio 2017; O'Sullivan, "Publishing *Holes*"), remaining one of the imprint's flagship projects, and the publishing house includes leading figures such as Nick Montfort, Stephanie Strickland, John Barber, and Jason Nelson among its authors. New Binary Press is reflective of the culture of assemblage that one encounters in the space occupied by new media artists and writers; its catalog is somewhat dissonant, functioning as something of a laboratory designed to facilitate literary experiments, a sandbox for wilder things without a home. While I have not really fulfilled what I set out to accomplish with my press, its founding purpose remains clear in that it is an experiment in the production and publication of all kinds of literature, print, electronic, and whatever else might seem interesting.[9]

*Holes* is a useful staging point from which to embark on a discussion of e-lit publishing, as it demonstrates one of the key differences between print and screen forms. As I wrote in *Holes: Decade I*, a special anniversary edition print volume of the work's first ten years' worth of lines:

> *Holes* isn't something I've published, it's something I *publish*, and as such, it is a work with which I hold a very strange relationship. A manuscript is proposed and submitted, given form and sold—that is the usual order of things. The publishing process doesn't end with that first act of dissemination, publishers must always retain something of a stake in the works they have taken charge of, but the relationship does change once a manuscript is a book. There are many activities post-production—promotion, interaction with booksellers, the realisation of subsequent editions—but a publisher's intervention usually declines over time. Once a publisher has made a book of a manuscript, they release it to the wild—books live and die in public, far from the guarded confines of their press.

[9]It may be that the experiment will soon come to an end, but whatever its future, it has been a worthwhile endeavor.

> Even with born-digital literature, aside from the odd bit of file and server maintenance, the publisher will fade to the periphery as their ability to contribute to a title's critical and commercial success slowly starts to diminish.
>
> (O'Sullivan, "Publishing Holes": 109)

As an iterative piece of organic, autobiographical writing which grows every day,[10] *Holes* does not fit into the natural order of publishing: it is a work with which I am, as the person who brings it to the public, perennially engaged.

This particular characteristic, the need for *Holes* be regularly updated, is common across many forms of electronic literature, particularly contemporary literary games which rely on complex engines that need to be maintained so as to remain compatible with operating systems. To commit to such long-term work in a precarious market makes little economic sense for publishers, and if it is the author doing the maintenance, perhaps it is the presence of the publisher which makes no sense.

If the future of electronic literature is one which will include publishers, then it should be possible to isolate aspects of the literary process that genuinely benefit from the intervention of such. Certain ideological positions will hold that publishers have assumed a less than benevolent role within the literary market, but these criticisms are typically directed at the wider publishing *industry* of late capitalism, whereas this chapter is presented on the basis of my own critical assumption that yes, some publishers are "bad," and some are "good." The aim here is not to assess the motivations or validity of specific publishers, but rather, acknowledge that publishers do exist, and that many have made significant contributions to worthwhile artistic projects. In the age of contemporary e-lit, can such contributions continue. In other words, will there ever be another Eastgate?

Eastgate is the ideal exemplar as Bernstein's press came to prominence before the material culture of e-lit was transformed by the web. The history of Eastgate and thus of electronic literature is one of "floppies, diskettes, and compact discs" (O'Sullivan and Grigar 2019: 429), a culture which partly persisted after Eastgate in the circulation of thumb drives containing ELO collections, and in the Blu-ray disks used for special editions of literary games like *Dear Esther*. But the majority of contemporary works are now digital downloads of some sort. Previous to this turn, when diskettes of all shapes, sizes, and formats were the dominant means of sharing, projects like Eastgate had a very clear purpose: they took on the task of committing

[10]New lines tend to be added on a weekly basis, as Graham sends me the previous seven days' worth of writing every Sunday.

hypertextual fictions to disk and getting those disks to readers. But the task of Eastgate was not simply to provide some storage medium upon which titles could be sold; Bernstein's publishing house also provided the Storyspace platform within which many of the iconic texts were authored.[11] In this sense, Eastgate's role in the process of production was not only about making a thing of the manuscript, it also provided the tools necessary for the manuscript to be written.

It is in this latter regard, the facilitation of writing as production, as opposed to just production post-writing, that publishers have a potential role to play. Gaming engines like Unity and Unreal are, quite arguably, the future of contemporary ludoliterary works.[12] While not developed for the sake of literature, these engines are the contemporary equivalent of Storyspace, open to authors using them to achieve literary intentions. Eastgate's founder once remarked that "[a]ny hypertext system will, sooner or later, be used to make art" (Bernstein 2010), and yet, how wonderful it would be if we had more systems—such as Twine[13]—which have been *designed* for such practice. Perhaps such design would only serve to constrain, to map literary structures to pre-defined schematics and templates, and so we are better off as we are?[14] Either way, while many authors are turning to game engines like Unity and Unreal to realize their aesthetic ambitions, the dynamic is not quite the same: there is no publisher behind such systems, supporting authors in their pursuit of some act of literary expression that has no explicit commercial value—there are platforms, but these platforms do not necessarily have an Eastgate.

Herein lies the potential for publishers to contribute to e-lit from the perspective of production: as the potential for making literature through computation expands, so too will the skills required to achieve such acts of

[11]Eastgate still maintains Storyspace as a hypertext authoring system for MacOS ("Storyspace 3 for MacOS").

[12]I am borrowing here from Astrid Ensslin, who categorizes the "various degrees of hybridity" represented by electronic literature and literary games in terms of her literary-ludic spectrum (Ensslin 2014: 43–5).

[13]One could argue that Twine has usurped Storyspace as the field's most popular system for authoring hypertextual fiction (Friedhoff 2013).

[14]To give an example of what I mean by this, one might consider looking at works of electronic literature developed in Twine: structurally, these are all essentially *the same*. Their content varies, but users of this intuitive platform—and it has many because it is robustly and intuitively crafted—all tend to stick to the same limited out-of-the-box narrative frame offered by Twine. Hypertextual fiction, in an era where immersion matters, should be about more than just text-based forking paths. But if text-based forking paths is what the dominant authoring system offers, then text-based forking paths is what we will get, again and again. It is a wonderful platform and its creators deserve credit, but if *everyone* is using Twine, the advancement of new forms of electronic literature will suffer.

expression. E-lit's contemporary moment is *now*, in that story-driven literary games are finally being embraced by a popular audience.[15] It would be to the detriment of literature for this trend to continue alongside the alienation of authors who, while recognizing the value of computational aesthetics, are unable to realize artistic visions due to a lack of digital literacy. At present, e-lit practices usually constitute community-centered activities (Eskelinen et al. 2014: 235), confining the aesthetic affordances of this space to those who are a part of it already. Publishers can play an active and vital role in the production of electronic literature by pairing authors with technical collaborators, by supporting the development of intuitive authoring systems like Storyspace and Twine, and by generally encouraging opportunities for those who can write to do so for interactive screens.[16]

But what of distribution? When Eastgate titles were completed, they found their way onto floppies that were packaged and sold. The publisher made this happen, they managed the transaction, and so they took their cut, and the author theirs, functioning in much the same way as the print industry. Now, everything is either published freely to the web or downloaded through some Steam-like catalog, a place where *all the readers will be*. This is where the case for publishers becomes tricky. Take an artist who has set about creating a piece of multimodal writing, producing the work entirely out of their own labor and expertise: the thing is digital, if it is done then it is done and does not need to be made bookish, packaged in a way that is suited to distribution. The artist can simply take the thing they have made and bring it to the market themselves because the channels are abundantly clear and largely dictated by the platform for which the work has been created. At no point do they really need a publisher, because unlike the print trade, pretty much anyone can access these digital distribution channels—the Steams and app stores—without capital or experience.[17]

And yet, publishers can still play an active role in the task of bringing the work of writers to readers. While the app-store model of distribution is suited to certain types of projects, the time of web-based works of multimodal fiction has not yet passed. In the case of *novelling*, New Binary Press made no contribution to the production, which came from the authors readymade for dissemination. They needed a publisher with a server capable of hosting

[15]I have written about such titles elsewhere—see, for example, "Electronic Literature's Contemporary Moment: Breeze and Campbell's 'All the Delicate Duplicates'" (O'Sullivan) and "The Dream of an Island: *Dear Esther* and the Digital Sublime" (O'Sullivan).

[16]I appreciate that such ambitions are not so easy to accomplish, but the market for digital fictions packaged as games is thriving, and so publishers should be excited by the pursuit of any title that can bring them into such a creative and potentially lucrative space with such a diverse, global audience.

[17]The scale of the projects we are discussing needs to be considered here: we are not considering ambitious AAA video games designed for the mass-market.

the piece, and this is the part that New Binary Press plays in the work: it is public because of the technical infrastructure provided by its publisher. The challenge is that it is freely available online, and a model that allows authors and publishers to benefit from such an arrangement is not readily apparent.

It would not have been overly difficult for the author of *novelling* to set up or purchase some hosting themselves, once more removing the need for a publisher to distribute their work to its audience, but a good publisher thinks about distribution in the context of longevity; a good publisher will ensure the work persists for as long as possible. If we consider the Eastgate School to be electronic literature's first generation, then our community has already lost a generation to obsolescence. The great myth of the digital is that it persists, that data lives somewhere forever, ready to be reclaimed in its ideal state should some media archeologist come looking—the truth is that data dies all time, or is simply left to rot, unable to voice itself through systems which speak entirely different languages.

The antidote to such loss might be projects like *Pathfinders*, established to document the experience of early electronic literature (Grigar and Moulthrop 2015). But the thing and the experience of the thing are not equivalent, and while *Pathfinders* is a hugely important act of cultural preservation, such endeavors will always be playing catch-up—and only capable of capturing a very small part of the canon—if authors and publishers do not think more intentionally about the life of a work. Perhaps this is how it should be, perhaps, to quote Simon Biggs, to preserve works of electronic literature is to "fix them in time and space, like an insect in amber … alienating the work from its context and rendering it senseless" (2010: 201). Perhaps authors have a right to create electronic literature designed for ephemerality, to establish the paratextuality of their works without concern for acts of recreation which often distort esthetics? Publishers have a responsibility to document literary history before it is erased, but there are instances where documentation is all we will have. As digital ecologies evolve, many born-digital works will be lost, and perhaps—just perhaps—the authors of such pieces are fine with future generations knowing these things existed without being positioned to actively engage with them in a more tangible sense?

Of course, there is a marked difference between ephemerality as artistic intention and loss "from a simple lack of care" (Biggs 2010: 201). Publishers can provide such care, ensuring that works and their contexts are documented, if only as a bibliographic record intended to carry the existence of a piece into the future. Artists tend not to think about legacy, partly because many assume their work might achieve this independent of their efforts, but for the critical reception necessary for preservation to be achieved through attention, work usually needs a publisher, an entity dedicated to finding some place for its wards within the cultural record.

Such a cultural record can only be so big: we cannot publish everything nor should we seek to do so. The community of practice which surrounds

e-lit has suffered from an absence of publishers acting as filters. We are seeing at present an increasing number of writers do very trivial and esthetically uninteresting things with computers and calling it electronic/digital/multimodal literature, representing the field of practice in a way that makes me, as a scholar and practitioner who has invested their intellectual time and professional labor in this space, deeply uncomfortable. Without publishers, this influx will continue, making it difficult for the uninitiated to see through the noise to the quality works of electronic literature. "Gatekeeper" is typically drawn upon as an ugly word, but when publishers act as gatekeepers—when we have enough of them and they are sufficiently dissonant in their perspective—they can play an essential role in the protection of cultural spaces.

Turning the ideals of publishing as production, distribution, and prestige into a viable model for the publishing of electronic literature may prove an insurmountable challenge for most smaller, independent operations. Electronic literature "is not a market-driven literary phenomenon, but a community-driven scene with an accompanying set of aesthetic, social, and cultural values and practices" (Eskelinen et al. 2014: 235), and so the few commercial successes that one might point to will probably remain the exception rather than the norm. But that does not mean the community should not continue to consider the role that publishing can play in the advancement of electronic literature.

Without wanting to end on a pessimistic note, my realization that publishing electronic literature is currently quite futile came in the guise of *All the Delicate Duplicates* (Breeze and Campbell 2017), an exemplary piece of e-lit which *I could not have published*. It was produced by its contributors, and released to the wild via Steam, the same marketplace where one can find all of the titles created by studios like The Chinese Room. Such works are the best that contemporary e-lit as a form has to offer, and they have been offered without a publisher. I cannot think of one thing which New Binary Press might have offered these titles. Publishers have been described as "merchants of culture," as hybrid creatures, "one part star gazer, one part gambler, one part businessman, one part midwife and three parts optimist" (Bhaskar 1). As far as publishing electronic literature is concerned, at the time of writing, I am no longer an optimist.

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