

THE WORLD OF ON-LINE FICTION

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Although the past five years has given rise to a flood of commentary on how the Internet is changing our lives and our culture, these discussions have remained silent when it comes to one of the areas where the online world may be having the greatest impact: literary society.

This silence is a result of the dismissing attitude of the literary and academic establishment toward on-line publishing efforts. The traditional critics seem to admit the validity of internet-based works only to the extent that these works case themselves as “new media” pieces. Until very recently, all cyber texts, multimedia e-projects, and interactive fictions were either treated as amateurish and not worthy of serious attention by the literary authorities, or simply ignored. Whether the authorities of print literature admit it or not though, the quality and importance of internet fiction is on the rise. One may discover that a remarkable amount of genuinely original and powerful prose is published on-line.

At present, even the most widely read literary journals have an extremely limited circulation. New on-line literary journals appear monthly and often have a circulation far in excess of even the most successful publications. By comparison, the venerable journals have an annual circulation of around 8000; new literary sites get over 100000 visitors each month.

In recognition of the Internet's power to reach a mass audience, a growing number of traditional journals have started to produce online versions of their publications. Many of them offer only teaser versions of their print journals, but others provide full-text access to their content. The real fact is that on-line writing will play a greater and greater role in forming cultural beliefs about what literature can and should be.

This is not to suggest that on-line publishing will replace paper journals; for the foreseeable future at least, most authors will continue to consider literally seeing their names print as the ultimate hallmark of success, and paper and ink carry an emotional and visual weight that are in no danger of being substituted by pixels and bytes. By providing a low-cost, wide-circulation medium, the Internet will increasingly serve as the frontier where new and experimental literary works can flourish and where new trends and aesthetic expectations are created.

Many writers turn to publishing on-line as a matter of convenience and out of a sense of desperation. Most print literary journals receive hundreds if not thousands of submissions, out of which only a few dozen are chosen for publication; most journals have a response time of three or more which means that it may take years for a writer to find his story published in a journal. All of these things, combined with effort of sending out a print manuscript, led the authors to turn to on-line publications.

Surveying the field of on-line fiction, we can come to the conclusion that the Internet affected the ways the stories are written. Stories on the Internet are much shorter. The simple fact is that that many people find it harder to read texts on a computer screen than on a page. In addition to their length, the tone of on-line stories tends to differ from their printed versions. This may be a result of the way in which most people use the Internet. A final difference between on-line fiction and print fiction is the willingness of internet literary publishers to accept experimental works. The lack of a traditional canon on-line also contributes to this spirit of inclusiveness and experimentation; internet publishers are not faced with the same pressures as print journals. As the influence of internet fiction continues to grow, we can expect to see many of these trends filter back to the print mainstream as a new generation of writers find their voices on-line. The Internet should not be regarded as an alternative to traditional

literary venues; it is time to recognize the world of on-line publishing for what it really is: a frontier of great opportunity.