The Electronic Literature Directory

Goals and Needed Resources

What Is the Directory?

The Electronic Literature Directory is a unique and valuable resource for readers and writers of literature in the age of new media. It provides an extensive database of listings for writing that draws upon animation, interaction, audio, or other electronic elements that could not be accommodated by print. The descriptive entries cover poetry, fiction, drama, and nonfiction of literary interest. The Directory offers easy access to one of the most exciting and fastest-growing bodies of cutting-edge literature. Among the new forms of writing represented here are hypertexts and other interactive pieces, kinetic or animated poems, multimedia works, automatically generated texts, and works that allow readers to add their own text. Directory users can also enjoy the enhancements that the new technology brings to traditional literature, such as streaming audio readings of poetry by masters ranging from e.e. cummings and Dylan Thomas to contemporary Pulitzer Prize winners.

The rapidly expanding Directory currently offers descriptive listings for over 825 works, 475 authors, and 100 publishers. Many readers, writers, and teachers have come to depend upon this important reference tool for its unparalleled depth and ease of use, and the Directory receives over 1,000 visitors a week.

The utility of the Directory lies in the breadth and depth of its content as well as the ease with which users can access that content. They can browse works by genre, length, or electronic techniques employed; for example, they can view only hypertext fiction or audio recordings of poetry. They can browse author and publisher listings alphabetically. They can find an individual work by typing its title or descriptive keywords, and they can find an author by typing in a name. Listings include live links to all works and publishing sites on the Web, and each author record includes e-mail address and homepage URL.

To ensure the comprehensiveness and accuracy of Directory data, the ELO sets up access accounts for listed authors and publishers, allowing them to log in and update biographical or publisher information and edit or add entries for work they've written or published. This also reduces demands on staff resources and helps generate user interest in the Web site. Any author or publisher can contact us to request a Directory account. If we can confirm that the person making the request writes or publishes work that is appropriate for the Directory, we will create the account and provide him or her with data-entry instructions. Since either the author or the publisher of a particular work can create an entry for it, we have instituted duplicate-prevention mechanisms in the database.

Short-Term Goals

1. Port database to mySQL. Our most pressing concern currently is to finish moving the Directory database from the proprietary database system Texis to the open-source database system mySQL. This requires completely rewriting all the database code. The move will allow us to run the database on the ELO server rather than relying upon Kineta Technologies to host the database. The database is currently running on a Kineta Technologies server free of charge, but this has ceased to become a viable arrangement for the long term.

2. Fix Bugs. The database currently contains a number of bugs that affect data entry, administrative procedures, and searching and browsing the Directory. Known bugs have been logged in a bug-tracking system and are being addressed by our programmer.

3. Complete partially implemented features. Many important features have not yet been fully implemented. Here are some significant examples: Some of the data in the database is not yet viewable by Directory users, because the appropriate reporting code has not yet been written. Users cannot yet restrict the listing of works to contain only works that meet certain criteria. Eventually they will be able to view only works written in a specified language, published before or after a specified date, not self-published, and so on. Many current features should also be refined to make the database easier to administer and easier to use by visitors and contributors.

4. Improve quality control of data. Our current resources allow us to do little more than occasional spot-checks of the accuracy of most entries we have not created ourselves. We want to be able to systematically proofread entries, check their descriptive data against the works themselves, and confirm that they are correctly categorized and that they meet our criteria for inclusion in the Directory. We want to be able to check accuracy of listings made for works written in foreign languages as well as in English. We want to implement more automatic checking of data as it entered, which will require additional programming. We want to periodically perform automatic checking of the URLs listed in the Directory, to eliminate broken links.

5. Make the Directory truly comprehensive. Authors and publishers cannot be relied upon completely to enter everything that should be in the Directory. Many entries must be created by ELO staff to fill in gaps in the Directory's contents. This requires research as well as data entry work.

6. Improve communication with contributors. We want to be able to respond more quickly to people who ask for accounts with the Directory or who have problems such as losing their passwords. We also want to automatically notify authors of corrections that have been made to their listings, new listings of their work that have been added by their publishers or ELO staff, and links to their Web works that have become broken. We want to periodically e-mail authors a copy of their complete listings, which they can check for accuracy. (This is especially important for authors who don't have an account with the Directory.) We also want to expand our efforts to seek out authors and publishers who should have a Directory account, including those writing or publishing in languages besides English.

Long-Term Goals

1. Add reviews and recommendations. The entries in the Directory contain factual descriptions only. To make the Directory more useful and help guide users to work they will probably enjoy reading, we want to offer recommendations and reviews that are linked to the entries for relevant works, authors, or publishers. The database will encompass three categories of reviews/recommendations: a) short recommendations written by the Directory administrator, other ELO staff, or respected critics commissioned by ELO; b) short recommendations written by visitors to the Directory site (similar to Amazon.com reader reviews); c) summaries of and links to reviews published elsewhere.

Directory users will not only be able to read these recommendations, they will also be able to limit the listings displayed to include only recommended work. They'll be able to list all the recommendations of specific reviewers as well.

2. Provide automatic notification services. Directory users will be able to sign up to be automatically notified when new entries are added that meet a specified interest. For example, they could ask to be notified whenever new work appears from a particular author or in a particular category (such as hypertext fiction).

3. Provide linkable custom views. Anyone will be able to link from a Web site directly to a page in the Directory that lists all of the works written by a specified author. Authors will be able to link to these pages from their Web sites as an alternative to maintaining up-to-date listings of all their works on their own sites.

Needed Resources

We cannot achieve all of these goals with our current resources. Additional funding is needed to hire new staff and enable current staff to continue their work.

Current Staff

Database Programmer
Responsibilities: Finish rewriting the database in mySQL. Fix known bugs and new bugs as they arise. Finish implementing currently planned features, including those required to improve quality control and communication with contributors, as described above. Create the new features required to implement the long-range goals described above.

Supervisor/Administrator
Responsibilities: Oversee all programming, test the results, and maintain bugs record. Handle quality control of data and communication with contributors. Determine improvements needed in Directory structure and interface. Design and oversee programming of the features needed to implement the long-term goals described above. Train and supervise assistants when most quality control and contributor liaison tasks are turned over to them.

New Staff Needed

Assistants or Interns
Responsibilities: Proofread entries. Check entries against the works they describe for accuracy. Make sure all listed works are appropriate for the Directory. Fix broken links and out-of-date email addresses. Respond to queries from potential contributors and set up new accounts as necessary. Help with beta-testing and usability testing of new features. Seek out authors and publishers who should be listed. Create new entries when necessary to fill gaps.

Foreign-Language Advisors
Responsibilities: Assist with listings of work written in languages other than English. Contact writers and publishers working in languages other than English to invite them to open accounts with the Directory.