The ebook

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Ebooks can be divided into two types: the kinds of digital repositories associated with manuscript archives or rare books, and those available from online publishers. In the first type, a relatively small number of Web-based electronic book sites can be found on the internet. Two well-known examples are The Million Books Project and Project Gutenberg. Both have the intention of committing as many books as possible out of copyright to electronic form, to be made freely available to anyone with the means to access and download them. Project Gutenberg contains many English language books, although it is not devoted exclusively to English language texts. It contains over 15,000 books in English and about 2,000 in other languages. The number and range of books, considering that the digitisation is carried out by enthusiasts, is impressive by any standards.

Online publishing is rather different. Most major publishers have some Web presence, in the sense of a website advertising their catalogues, editorial policies, information for authors, and so on. Although they have a Web presence, these publishers are traditionally in the business of publishing works to be printed and bound. But there are publishers, such as US publishers, Random House and Eastgate Systems, Inc., that commission works published exclusively in electronic form. Random House publish in both media and have a separate ebook category, further divided into subjects and genre.

On the other hand, Eastgate Systems almost exclusively publishes electronic, hypertext material based on its proprietary authoring system ‘Storyspace’. The significance of Eastgate is that the publishing is centred on hypertext – the linking mechanism that permits users to bring different pages to the desktop via an electronic button known as a hyperlink. Publication of fiction in this form is still certainly not widespread, but it is growing. In the next section, I will look at hypertext fiction and consider, in particular, how the dynamics of reading are altered in a hypertextual environment.

6.5 Hypertext fiction and new reading practices

Thus far, I have considered some aspects of the relationship between computer technology and English in the context of more conventional approaches to reading. I would now like to consider new practices in English