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Blurring the Line Between Apps and Books

By **NOAM COHEN**

STEPHEN ELLIOTT, a 38-year-old from San Francisco, just introduced his first piece of software for sale: an app for the **iPad** and **iPhone** called the Adderall Diaries.

He's not exactly a programmer — better to call him a writer. And the app that he conceived looks a lot like an electronic book. That is, most people who buy the app will do so to read the text of "**The Adderall Diaries**," his "memoir of moods, masochism and murder" based on his childhood in Chicago group homes, which was published in hardcover last year by Graywolf Press.

But Mr. Elliott says he has good reasons for producing his own iPad app, separate and apart from the e-book version of "Adderall Diaries" that is for sale, say, for the **Kindle** or the iPad reader from **Apple**. But those reasons are not the artistic, meta-fictional ones you might suspect — you know, so that when characters enter a bar, you suddenly hear music and a glass dropped by the waiter, or more fancifully, you can make them turn around and go somewhere else.

Rather than exploit the multimedia potential of an app book, Mr. Elliott said he wanted to include tools that cater to a special group: Stephen Elliott readers.

"As an author, I want you to have the best experience," he said. "People want to talk about the books they are reading with other people. Why, with everything we know, wouldn't you include a chat room with your e-book?"

Once readers buy the app, he says, they are beginning a relationship with him and other readers; they can leave comments and read responses and updates from the author. They may even be told down the line that he has a new book for sale and then be able to buy it through the app.

This practical, business-oriented focus is something he shares with the developer of his iPad app, **Electric Literature**, a company with offices at the foot of the Brooklyn entrance to the

Manhattan Bridge that was **founded** by Andy Hunter and Scott Lindenbaum, who met as **Brooklyn College** master of fine arts students in 2006.

Electric Literature is a literary journal that enlists all manner of digital formats, like PDFs, Kindle, iPhone and **YouTube** animations. The money saved by not using a printer (\$5,000 by their reckoning) goes to pay five authors \$1,000 each for appearing in the journal.

In the more than a year since the company's founding, Mr. Hunter and Mr. Lindenbaum said in an interview at their offices, the challenges of marketing a digital journal -- rather than finding great writing to publish -- have taken up the bulk of their time. Early on, the novelist **Rick Moody** worked with Electric Literature to produce a short story in little bursts on **Twitter**, generating a lot of free publicity.

“We really care about the community of independent publishers,” Mr. Hunter said. “We’re publishers. We’re not going into the game to be software developers.”

Nonetheless, last weekend, Electric Literature introduced a separate service at **electricpublisher.com** to create an inexpensive book app along the lines of what it made for Mr. Elliott. The pricing starts at \$600 for a single book app, with additional charges for creating an app-based bookshelf that contains more than one book for sale.

To create a book app, Electric Literature had to come up with its own e-reader software: before you can consider tools that allow for sharing comments or sending messages, or incorporating video and audio clips, for that matter, Mr. Hunter said, “the experience has to be equal with iBooks,” referring to Apple’s e-reader software.

And how can a little company come up with software to equal Apple or **Amazon**? Motivated programmers who believe in the literary mission, he said: “That’s what technology is all about. It’s a disruptive force, where a very small group can compete with the big guys.”

Right now, Electric Literature has only a few book apps either made or in development, including the journal’s. Mr. Elliott, the author of seven books, says he has sold apps only in the “double digits,” substantially fewer than in print or e-book form. Dennis Johnson of Melville House Publishing says he is working with Electric Literature to introduce an app book before Thanksgiving. He will not disclose the title now, for fear of stoking interest before it is for sale.

The attraction is obvious, he said.

“If you publish work that is hard to sell in the American market, say literary fiction in translation, this is another format to hardcover, paperback and e-book,” Mr. Johnson said. “A fourth line of revenue.”

In an interview, he imagined the possibilities, like having readers whose devotion is deeper than merely dipping into a title, who would install a piece of software onto a phone or tablet. “I love the idea of putting books on subscription,” he said, “of having a membership in your publishing house, of having a readership invested in your books.”

Of course, for all the independence an app gives a publisher, especially a small publisher or individual writer, there are tolls along the way: Apple gets 30 percent of every app sold and every “in-app purchase,” which is processed through its iTunes store. Mr. Elliott pays that charge, as well as the share his publisher, Graywolf, takes for an e-book sale. (Thus the iBooks version of Adderall Diaries costs \$9.99; the iPad app \$14.99.)

And Apple makes no bones about being more intrusive in dealing with apps, which it “curates,” as opposed to the books it sells. As Jesse David Hollington, the applications editor for the Web site iLounge, [described last month](#), Apple has particular guidelines for apps developers: “We view apps different than books or songs, which we do not curate. If you want to criticize a religion, write a book. If you want to describe sex, write a book or a song, or create a medical app.”

Which means that to Apple, Mr. Elliott is a programmer, not a writer.

“They have some kind of rating system,” he said. Before approving the app, “they asked me if there was sex and violence, and I said, ‘Yeah, a lot.’ ”